

*The  
Boncoeur Affair*

*Harvey Wickham*





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# THE BONCOEUR AFFAIR





# THE BONCOEUR AFFAIR

BY

HARVEY WICKHAM

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# THE BONCOEUR AFFAIR





# THE BONCOEUR AFFAIR

## CHAPTER I

### A JEUNE FILLE

JAYNE BONCOEUR lay watching the early morning sun thrust its fingers through the slats of the heavy outside blinds that were never opened. She had been dreaming that she was a princess kept prisoner by a host of dragons, and the sunlight was somehow like the fairy prince who had come to rescue her.

The bedroom door opened, and in came a very stout woman—almost a female Buddha—in a wheeled chair pushed by a sallow, dyspeptic looking man wearing spectacles.

“*Maman! Papa!*” cried Jayne, flinging herself first on the breast of the woman and then into the arms of the man. “You have

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come to see me before breakfast. *C'est incroyable.*"

"*C'est ton fête*—hast thou forgotten?" asked Madame Boncoeur stolidly, but after a passionate embrace. "Thy father has brought a present. Get up, little cabbage. Twenty years old. *Pensez!* Almost a woman."

"It's a necklace," said Boncoeur, choking back a lump in his throat with a man's natural shame in the presence of tender emotions. "Pray the *bon Dieu* that it does not make thee vain."

Jayne fastened the pearls around her neck, thrust her feet into a pair of bedroom slippers, and danced ecstatically before an old-fashioned mirror which hung between the front windows. She was dark, slender, with only her lips fully ripened into beauty. Everywhere else immaturity enveloped her as the shell envelops the half-freed chick. Yet it was an immaturity of spirit rather than of body—a secret which her simple white night-dress but imperfectly concealed.

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There were signs of coming rebellion when she turned again to her parents.

“And may I wear them, and not keep them locked up in a stupid box?” she demanded.

“Thou mayest wear them to-day,” conceded the mother, with a doubtful frown.

“Then there’s just one thing more,” continued Jayne, approaching her father as the likelier subject for a fresh assault. “I want to walk this afternoon in the Luxembourg Gardens—alone.”

“What a mad idea! Walk in the gardens by all means. But Charlotte shall accompany thee.”

“No, *maman*, I want to go alone. It’s my birthday, and I want to feel that I’m no longer a child. Ninette walks out alone.”

“She is older,” explained the father.

“Only a year.”

“It’s not to be thought of,” the mother broke in. “If Jayne is not a child, all the more need of a chaperone till she’s married. The next thing and she’ll be asking to parade the streets in her necklace.

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“Be a good daughter and dress thyself. Don’t let happiness come between thee and obedience.”

Madame Boncoeur was wheeled from the room by her husband. Jayne began slowly to put on a sober morning frock. Then she went to the window, shoved the half-drawn curtains completely aside, and looked out.

The slats of the shutters still somewhat obstructed the view, but between them she could catch glimpses of pedestrians passing along the quai Béthune, and beyond them a sparkling strip of the Seine. It was the only part of Paris she really knew—a part as unprogressive as the régime under which she lived.

Not even the late war, when it filled other parts of the city with soldiers and men speaking strange tongues, had given the least touch of modernity to the somber quiet of that Isle of St. Louis, folded about by the arms of the river just above Notre Dame. No tourist ever set foot there. Even the police knew it only as the home of dully



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prosperous bourgeois, eminently respectable and therefore of no particular interest.

To Jayne, however, it had all the fascination of an island surrounded by mysterious waters, to which came the strangest dramas—only to unfold enigmatic scenes and then pass to wonderful unknown endings beyond her view. A cloud lifted from her eyes as she stood there by her window—friendly in spite of the shutters. And when a truck rumbled across pont Sully, just to her left, she smiled. It reminded her of the chariot of the fairy prince, with whom she had danced in her dream.

“Good morning, little one,” said a voice behind her. “Twenty years! It’s quite a young lady—*hein?*”

A faded, middle-aged woman wearing a neat servant’s cap had entered with a tray, which she deposited upon a small table in the middle of the room. Jayne kissed her affectionately on both cheeks, and sat down to breakfast. She liked Charlotte—chiefly, perhaps, because she alone in all the world had stopped using *thee* and *thou*, those

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familiar pronouns which the French reserve exclusively for addressing relatives, sweethearts, servants, children and God.

“I wish I was really a young lady,” she said, snatching her lips from a scalding cup of chocolate. “But I guess I’m never going to be. To-day I wanted to go out walking alone, and they wouldn’t hear of it.”

“That’s nothing to pout over, *chérie*. We can go together. Has Ninette been in to see you yet?”

“Not likely—and she on the railroad all day yesterday! Ninette can go to Avignon and stay two weeks. Nobody ever bothers about her.”

“Your sister is older, and engaged to marry. When you are *fiancée* you will go where you wish, too.”

“No, Charlotte.”

Jayne paused, as if a painful suspicion for a long time lying vaguely within her mind had suddenly taken shape.

“No, it’s something about *me*. Ninette is a little older, but she’s twice as pretty. It’s she that ought to be taken stricter care of.

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And she did everything she liked long before M'sieu Noyeau asked for her hand. She wears, too, the kind of clothes that *maman* says are loud—when *I* ask for them.”

“It looks to me as if *you* had something rather fine,” returned the servant, pointing to the necklace which her eyes had never left since the beginning of the interview.

“Yes,” admitted the girl judicially. “It’s just like the one Ninette had three years ago. But why are the outside shutters always locked nowadays? I don’t know why it never struck me as funny before, but——”

“What a question, with only the basement between you and the sidewalk! Weren’t Ninette’s pearls stolen? You ought to have iron bars now.”

“Well, then, who is this friend of *maman*’s that Ninette went off to visit?”

“Goodness gracious! Isn’t it enough to have a birthday and a necklace and the best love of everybody in the house, without driving a body frantic with questions?”

“But if I could only stop wondering!”



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Jayne's glance went from the padlocks—which held the outer shutters in place, each with a grip like that of an ugly hand—and sought the horizontal strips of view beyond.

"The quai is always interesting, anyway. I look out and imagine all sorts of things."

"It's time, child, you gave up so much imagining."

"But I don't imagine them all, Charlotte. There are wonderful ladies—real ladies—and handsome men who go by in cabs like kings and queens. And there are laborers, and street boys, and fights, and processions of priests from the cathedral, and old women with carts. Sometimes there are gypsies."

"Gypsies?" The servant, who had begun tidying up the room, came sharply to a halt in front of her young mistress.

"Well, one gypsy anyway."

"Jayne, you mustn't mix up the things you imagine with the things you see."

"I don't. I've been seeing her for months—not often, but every once in a while. She looks up at the house, and the last time I was almost sure she saw me and nodded."

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Charlotte was clearly disturbed.

“It’s only some old woman with a shawl,” she said finally. “I think I’ve seen her myself. But if I were you I wouldn’t begin talking such nonsense to your mother. She’s over-tender of you, and if you’re not careful she’ll be changing your room to one on the court away from everything.”

With this admonition ringing in her ears, Jayne found herself alone. She nibbled at a small, hard cake, but showed little appetite, and a look of perplexity gradually darkened her features.

“Padlocks! Forbidden to go out alone! And I mustn’t speak of gypsies,” she sighed. “Maybe it *was* just an old woman in a shawl. But what made Charlotte think that mother wouldn’t like it?”

The conviction that life—her own especially—was filled with inexplicable things threw her into a fit of quite unchildish musing, which continued until she was roused by a blow struck sharply against one of the shutters outside.

Jayne looked out, and at first saw no one.

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Then she caught sight of a bent, wrinkled old woman huddled up close under the window. Her face was repulsively dirty, yet not without traces of an original beauty. But what made Jayne start back with an exclamation was a shawl wrapped gypsy-fashion about the hag's head and shoulders.

"Don't be afraid, *chérie!*" crooned a soft voice. "I came to bring you good luck. Can you get out?"

"The shutters are locked," whispered Jayne, regaining her courage and pressing her face against the barrier. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"I want to tell your fortune and show you the beautiful world. Locked, did you say?"

Jayne was seized with a sudden longing. The beautiful world was the very thing she wished to know more about.

"I might come out by the door if nobody is looking," she ventured.

The gypsy shook her head.

"No, for then how would you get back? Haven't you a poker in your room?"

"A poker and a pair of tongs and a fire-



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shovel, of course. How else would one attend to the grate?"

"Take the poker, then, and pry your shutter open. The window below is shuttered on the inside, I see. But there is a grating. You can easily climb up and down if you are strong."

"I am very strong, but——"

"Say no more. Nobody will see you, and you can meet me at Les Deux Chiens at two o'clock. It is by Notre Dame. Do you know it? Two nice green dogs on a red sign."

Jayne had seen the device often on her way to mass. And as the interior of the wine-shop it indicated was entirely beyond her experience, she had an idea that it was equally unknown to everybody else—a safe refuge where no one could possibly follow her.

Yet the proposal was too startling to be accepted all at once. Jayne drew back and tried to get her mental bearings. When she looked out again, prepared to acknowledge her lack of courage for such an undertaking, the gypsy was gone. Simply gone, and the

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sidewalk empty except for a few laborers and a conventionally dressed female of uncertain age making her way over the crossing at the corner.

Jayne was too astonished even to think. But soon her gaze was drawn from the quai to the room—especially to the grate, from the depths of which the handle of a stout iron poker peeped out, it not being cold enough for a fire. There was fascination in this poker, and five minutes later she had withdrawn one of the padlock staples—no easy feat, notwithstanding the softening influence of years and dampness upon the wood.

The rest of the morning she spent in mortal terror. True, she had replaced the staple. But what if somebody should come and discover that she had tampered with it?

Luncheon, with the Boncoeur family, was an inconsiderable affair. The head of the house—head also of a thriving chemical *usine* out near Conflans—never came home to the meal. In this he was imitated by his boarder, foreman and prospective son-in-

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law, Pierre Noyeau. The women, left thus alone, naturally saved themselves and their appetites for the evening. By one o'clock everyone had risen from the table.

Jayne hurried to her room. She was afraid that if she waited any longer it would be discovered what she had done to the padlock, while if she started out at once she might get back before Charlotte came to take her for her walk. She could then call attention to the condition of the fastening herself—with such pangs of conscience as need be dealt with only when they arrived.

To the possibility of the gypsy not yet being at the rendezvous, Jayne gave no thought, for she had by no means made up her mind to venture as far as *Les Deux Chiens*. All she dared look forward to was a few minutes of genuine liberty. And so—having slipped through the window and closed the shutter behind her—she crossed to the other side of the Seine and went tripping down the *quai de la Tournelle*. The afternoon was warm and silvery, though it was only the twenty-second of March, and to



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be out of doors unattended was like having wings.

Ever since she could remember, vague warnings as to the dangers of the world had been dinned into her ears. But it looked as friendly now as the postman at Christmas. Her spirits bubbling over like a newly-opened bottle of champagne, she came by pont d'Arcole to the heavy-towered cathedral—and there, not ten steps beyond, was the weather-beaten but inviting sign of Les Deux Chiens.

Only in the very old quarters of very old cities will one find public houses and masterpieces of architecture growing, so to speak, side by side like oaks and creepers in a crowded wood. Ancient prescriptive rights, perpetuating the tolerant customs of a less critical age, no doubt account for the phenomenon. The wine-shop flourished in the very shadow of the church, and Jayne was carried on by the momentum of her excitement.

She found herself in a large room, wretchedly lighted, with a small, zinc-covered

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counter near the door and dirty tables with rickety iron chairs covering its floor-space. As she slipped into a corner of the unupholstered bench which ran about the walls, half a dozen laborers in grease-stained blouses turned to leer at her in surprised but apathetic admiration.

“*Du café,*” she gasped to the waiter who sauntered towards her.

He wiped his hands on his dingy apron, and stared. Couldn’t people see that this was a wine-shop and not a coffee-house? Young ladies, alone and without paint or powder, had no business to come blundering in. Yet a very young lady, and a dainty one at that, mustn’t be rebuffed.

“*Pardon,*” he smiled, after a doubtful pause, “*mais——*”

“*Mad’moiselle veut dire du vin,*” said a young man, gliding into a seat beside Jayne and unobtrusively extending a crumpled bill upon which the waiter’s fingers instantly closed. “Wine, not coffee. Don’t you understand?”

Jayne was thoroughly frightened now.

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Even a sight of the gypsy, whom her eyes sought everywhere, would have been reassuring. But the laborers had returned to their glasses and were no longer paying her the slightest attention. That was one relief. And the man who had rescued her from her dilemma was of such another sort, and dressed so exactly like the men she was accustomed to seeing at home, that her fears began to ebb even before he went on:

“You will excuse me, Mad’moiselle. But one can order only *l’alcooliques* here, and I didn’t want you to be embarrassed.”

“It was good of you,” she responded. “But I never should have come. I expected to meet someone.”

Her companion smiled.

“Then, since m’sieu is late——”

“It isn’t a gentleman. And it isn’t late. I’m ahead of time.”

“By Jove, it’s perfect!” exclaimed the other under his breath and in English.

The waiter brought a bottle of vintage Paul Roger and two glasses—the bank-note slipped into his hand having been of a de-



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nomination to work miracles—and Jayne tasted it because that seemed the thing to do. It brought back almost at once the rapturous feeling which she had lost on coming in from the street.

“My name is Benson,” she heard the young man saying. “Aren’t you going to tell me yours?”

“Why, of course. I am Jayne Boncoeur.”

“Not of the quai Béthune?”

“You don’t mean you know me?”

“No, but I’ve heard of your—your father. Who in the world did you come here to meet?”

Benson’s look had altered. It had become more serious. And when she let fall the word *gypsy* he showed unmistakable alarm.

“I must get you out of here before she comes,” he declared. “It isn’t safe to meet strangers in Paris—old women above all. Why, she might be anything.”

“You act as if you were afraid of her,” laughed Jayne, from the vantage ground of her new-found assurance. “Besides, you are a stranger, too.”

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“But I didn’t meet you by appointment. My villainy is at least impromptu.”

He echoed her laugh as he spoke, but lost no time in getting her out into the street. As they passed the open square of the *parvis Notre Dame* they could see an old woman, her face concealed by a shawl, coming towards them. It was easy to avoid her, however, by hurrying around a corner, and before Jayne could collect her once more scattered senses they were seated in a pleasant restaurant-café.

“You’ll get your coffee now,” said the young man. “I don’t want to fill you up with wine.”

The point of the remark was altogether lost upon Jayne, for the idea that wine might be dangerous simply never occurred to her. She was used to wine—even champagne occasionally—upon the table at home, and the trifling effects of her present indulgence had already begun to pass off.

Not so with a deeper intoxication which was invading her spirit. Benson talked on and on. He was about thirty, decidedly

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good looking, and every minute his glances became more eloquent. As she listened, her own eyes, too, grew brighter and brighter. There was no use in continuing to deny it to one's self—to keep on saying over and over again under one's breath that it was impossible, that miracles didn't happen. This young man who sat before her in the flesh was the fairy prince of whom she had so often dreamed.

The Latin temperament is warm-blooded. It knows nothing of the hesitations and slowly arriving emotions of the colder Anglo-Saxon. French parents are perhaps not acting without reason when they put quaint, old-fashioned restrictions in the way of their sons and daughters. By the time the pair were out upon the quai once more, the man was saying:

“Promise me that you'll surely come. I'll knock on the blind as I pass. And don't forget that I love you. This is serious. It came to me like a flash.”

And Jayne, seeing all the world in a glory, answered:

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“Yes, it came to me like that, too—suddenly—the feeling which I’ve been waiting all my life to find.”

“But you’ll be very careful?”

“Say *thou*. But I shall be very careful, indeed. Mother can hardly put her feet to the floor. All I have to fear is a scolding from Charlotte. Besides, you’ll soon have that letter of introduction to papa, and then everything will be right.”

With that she hurried on alone, hugging to her breast a box of candied marrons which Benson had bought. She little dreamed how very far from right things were going to be—and in the space of a few hours.



## CHAPTER II

### MURDER

JAYNE was almost home when a small but well-knit Frenchman, dressed in the conservative taste of the upper bourgeois, caught sight of her from the opposite side of the street and made immediately towards her.

“My dear! Can this be you?”

She recognized her sister’s fiancé, and answered with a childish pout:

“Pierre, if you tell on me I’ll never speak to you! It’s my birthday. I just had to slip out by myself—to prove that I’m really twenty.”

“Who said anything about telling?” Noyeau laughed. “But if you’re out alone it’s lucky I met you.”

“Why?”

“Because now I can slip you in again.”

“Will you do that, and say I was with you?”

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“It’s a bargain, but—how long have you been gone?”

“A good while, I’m afraid. But I simply had to. If I can’t do as I like before long I shall burst.”

She drew a deep breath, as though half-minded to bring about the threatened destruction then and there. And, indeed, she was nearly bursting—to tell. About the gypsy, at least. Benson was too wonderful to be revealed, even to Pierre, though Pierre’s manner and his unaccustomed use of the adult pronoun seemed to entitle him to some special favor.

“The folks *are* out of date,” he said, regarding her. “But leave everything to me. If there are questions, I’ll answer them.”

There were no questions. Madame Boncoeur had not left her room. And Charlotte, after worrying herself to exhaustion, had fallen asleep in her chair while wrestling with the problem whether she ought or ought not to raise an alarm. The presence of Pierre explained everything.



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Jayne went to her room, carefully replaced the staple in its padlock, and sat down to revel wickedly in thoughts of the afternoon. A little later, in the novelty of having her pearls around her neck and her luxuriant hair done up farther atop of her head than it had ever been before, she almost forgot that her best frock was substantial rather than pretty and that dinner wasn't to be the genuine birthday party for which she had so often longed.

The truth forced itself upon her quickly enough in the family dining-room on the floor above. Dinner wasn't even an ordinary meal. Her parents, plainly troubled about something, greeted her with only the slimmest pretense of gayety, relapsing almost at once into absent-minded silence. And Pierre had taken Ninette out to dine in some delectable resort down by the grand boulevards. Jayne slid from the heights of love and young-ladyhood into the very slough of immaturity, filled with ungratified wishes and a desire to cry. It didn't so much

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matter about Pierre. But Ninette hadn't seen her once during the entire day.

The evening passed in playing bezique with Charlotte. Then came a lonely revery, which was interrupted by the turning of a key in the door leading to her sister's room.

Never since she could remember had that key ever turned before. Ninette kept it on her side of the lock, and insisted on all communication taking its route through the hall. Yet there she stood in the forbidden opening dressed in a bewitching evening gown of tomato-red silk—a gown daringly low in the neck and terminating in mere wisps of pointed panels just below the knees. Her hair, which she had let down, gave her an untamed look. It was of a coppery gold. And from beneath her long lashes shone two liquid blue eyes, which—according to a family legend—she inherited from a maternal grandmother.

But what held Jayne's attention was an unwonted radiance—no mere reflection from the dress, but a sort of inward glow—which made her sister fairly dazzling.

## MURDER

“I’m sorry we missed each other this morning, sissy,” she began, closing the door behind her and taking Jayne eagerly in her arms. “But I was so done up. Then I had a dreadful row with *maman*. That’s why I didn’t stay home to dinner.”

“A row?”

“Yes, about—oh, she was disappointed in something and just wanted to be odious.”

By this time the two girls were sitting side by side on the bed, Jayne wondering if this could really be Ninette—the proud, free beauty who was in the habit of neglecting her.

“It’s too bad, Nina,” she brought out, still dazed by the warmth of her sister’s kiss.

“I don’t care. Pierre and I are going to be married almost right away, so it doesn’t matter what anybody else says or wants. But look here. I think we ought to see more of each other. We’re both growing up, and I declare we’re hardly acquainted. I’m going to leave the door between our rooms unlocked after this.”

It came to Jayne that Pierre might have



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betrayed her, at least to his *fiancée*, and that Ninette's tardy solicitude indicated an intention to watch her goings and comings.

"Have a candied marron!" she cried, jumping down and taking Benson's beautiful box from the bureau drawer where she had hidden it.

After all, she and her sister were peers now. Didn't they both have lovers? No need, then, to let the old ascendancy of the elder reassert itself.

"Who gave you these?" asked Ninette. "Were they a birthday present? And that reminds me. I haven't yet——"

"Pierre gave them to me," interrupted Jayne, seizing upon the only explanation she dared to put forward. She couldn't tell the truth—not yet. And Pierre seemed the safest pretense. He could hardly be mean enough to deny such a thing as that.

"I'm going to give thee one of my rings," Ninette went on.

Then she noticed the pearls, and almost snatched them.

"Where did you get this necklace?"

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“From the parents, of course.”

“Well, this is strange. Pearl for pearl, it’s the same as the string I lost.”

“How could it be the same? Haven’t you enough things of your own without wanting to claim mine?”

“I’m not claiming them, *p’tite*. I only meant they looked the same. Come and pick out your ring. All I ask for is this box of marrons. I know I shan’t sleep, and they’ll be nice to nibble on.”

Jayne complied somewhat sulkily, and being led to Ninette’s jewel case picked out the smallest ring she could find. It had come to her with a pang of jealousy that this full-blown young woman, who had grown up in the same house with her, belonged to a different world altogether, and was quite too happy to quarrel. It wasn’t even certain that she was convinced about the pearls. She merely didn’t care. Yet as Jayne turned to leave her, curled up in bed and her nose buried in a book, her heart softened.

“Ninette, I don’t see how you dare be so



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beautiful—and so happy. Charlotte says it brings bad luck.”

“Charlotte is a superstitious old maid. Don’t you worry. You’ll be just as pretty some day.”

“But what *makes* you so beautiful? I never saw you like it before.”

Ninette blushed in unmistakable confusion, which added the final touch to her loveliness, and declared that she had had enough of compliments. Jayne went thoughtfully back to her room, opened the violated blind and sat down to the novelty of an untrammelled view.

Midnight tolled from a hundred belfries—a few nearby, many at incredible distances—and for some reason the farther notes made her shiver, they sounded so like the ghosts of the nearer ones escaping and drifting away with long-drawn, diminishing cries.

Then a pedestrian came past, and behind him another who made no more sound than if he had been a shadow. Opposite the house the first one looked up and seemed to hesi-

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tate. And something in his face—or perhaps it was merely her own unfamiliarity with even the most ordinary types of night-prowler—frightened her into closing the shutter. Charlotte and *maman* were right. It was a wicked city in spite of its picturesqueness. She wondered how she had ever ventured out into its streets alone.

After that she was at least an hour in going to sleep, being haunted by the face she had seen and by the ringing of imaginary chimes. Oblivion came suddenly. Yet she woke in the morning unrefreshed and before anybody else was stirring. The house seemed very still—with a tense stillness that threatened every moment to cry out.

“I must have had a bad dream,” she reflected. “But I can’t remember what it was.”

Then Charlotte could be heard coming along the hall with the usual “little breakfast,” which everybody on the Continent takes in bed. She paused at Ninette’s room, and Ninette’s usually querulous morning voice rose pleasantly. Evidently for once

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she was beginning the day with good nature.

Coming into Jayne's room, Charlotte put down the tray and exclaimed:

“Lazy one! Are you asleep?”

Jayne answered nothing at all. *She* was not beginning the day good-naturedly. She felt that she ought to confess yesterday's escapade, and the prospect was not alluring.

Left alone, she had about come to the conclusion that she was now old enough to bear the burden of a guilty conscience in silence—when a crash of chinaware sounded startlingly from the adjoining chamber.

She ran to the communicating door, and saw her sister lying face-downwards on the floor in the midst of the wreckage of a breakfast table which had been drawn up by the bedside. She seemed to have fainted while reaching out for something.

The noise brought Charlotte, who gave one look and screamed. Then came Mrs. Cuit, the cook; Pierre Noyeau; and finally the father. Madame Boncoeur could be heard shouting from upstairs for somebody to come and help her down. The confusion



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was indescribable, but Jayne had already retired.

It was not that any clear picture of the truth had penetrated her understanding, but she had caught sight of the box of marrons lying on the coverlet, and slipped it under her arm with some wild notion that to be compelled to account for it now would be intolerable. Turning back from her own room to watch the scene through a chink in the door, she saw her sister about to be lifted by a half a dozen hands, and heard a voice cry out:

“No, no! We mustn’t touch her till after the police come.”

It was Pierre who cried thus, and Jayne without further hesitation locked her door behind her, put the box of marrons safely in its drawer, and returned to bed. There, with her head hidden by the bedclothes, she let the truth take possession of her mind.

Ninette was dead. And there was some dreadful mystery—something violent and unnatural—about it all.



## CHAPTER III

### THE STIR WHICH FOLLOWS CRIME

THE crises of our lives seem to be unique, but when viewed from a distance they usually fall into long-established classes and categories. Thus the startling cry of murder, shouted into the telephone by Pierre Noyeau, brought to the house—by a back way which avoided attention from the street—three men who showed not a trace of excitement among them. They were Boussai, the *commissaire* of police of the quarter; his clerk, or *gref-fier*; and Forgeron, his chief inspector.

Forgeron, a huge, clumsily-built man, grizzled with long service, was in fact so cheerful as to seem almost companionable. Only when directly addressed by his chief did his manner undergo a change, and then it was merely to stiffen with something like

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a military pose, indicating the importance—not of the case but of the service.

Boussai, gray-mustached, quiet and courteously formal, was evidently not accustomed to permit any familiarities.

“Take an inventory,” he ordered, after examining the body as well as he could without disturbing it. “My clerk will bring in a photographer and have a snap-shot taken, and you can get ready to affix the seals. I’ll attend to sending for the physician myself.”

Forgeron saluted, and at once set to work with pencil and note-book, moistening the lead for every item and mumbling audibly as he wrote.

*“Objects on the floor beside the body: one small table, overturned; one fancy cup of fine chinaware, broken into fourteen pieces and stained with remains of deceased’s breakfast chocolate; one silver spoon; three small cakes, unbroken; one cigarette, Levant brand, unsmoked, and no signs of either end having been wet by being put into the mouth; one match, Tison brand, unlighted; box of Tison matches, nearly full,*

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*on foot of bed; packet of Levant cigarettes beside it—originally contained twenty, nineteen still remaining, so all are accounted for. No burnt matches.”*

He was so absorbed in his occupation that he did not notice a young girl who slipped in, crept along the wall and stood with her back against the inner door, her hands behind her.

“Jayne, darling! This is no place for you. Go away at once.”

A woman in a wheeled chair occupying the center of the floor had spoken in a tone of scandalized horror, and Forgeron looked up.

“Get the family out,” he said to the *grefier*, seeing that the *commissaire* was no longer present to take command.

Then he went on with his task, first verifying the items and then noting them down:

*“Room handsomely furnished with bed in an alcove, has four openings. Two windows overlooking the quai have open-work wooden blinds secured by padlocks—a foreign-looking arrangement. Padlock key hanging on hook between windows, and both*



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*shutters locked. Two doors. The one leading to corridor was standing open when we arrived. The other, leading to an adjoining apartment, locked. Keys of both doors in the locks and on the inside."*

This done, he turned to the *greffier*, who stood waiting.

"Haven't you gone for that photographer yet?"

"No, I've been practicing picture-taking myself and brought my own kit along."

"Then I'd advise you to hurry and get it over with before the *commissaire* comes back."

The other chuckled, set a pocket camera on a chair so as to record the position of the body among its immediate surroundings, and touched off a flash. There was something coldly brutal in the whole proceeding, excused perhaps by the fact that no man dares to permit the incidents of his profession to enter very deeply into his emotions.

A few minutes later the physician arrived, stood for an instant looking at the dead girl,



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then turned her gently over so that he could see her face.

“A beauty!” he whispered to Boussai, who had come in with him. “And nothing had happened to frighten her, either.”

Indeed, Ninette’s features were composed, almost radiant, in spite of a few bruises where she had fallen.

“Cyanide of potassium,” he added, after stooping close to the still-smiling lips. “Death was instantaneous.”

“We must send her to the morgue, nevertheless, and have your diagnosis verified by an autopsy.”

“*Certainement!* But I’ll stake my reputation as a *médecin-légiste* that you’ll find it as I say. Also—but you can see that for yourself.”

The body was removed, and Boussai, calling his *greffier* and the *inspecteur* to his side, turned to Madame Boncoeur, who had resisted all efforts to wheel her from the room.

“May I ask — was this your favorite daughter?” he began abruptly.

“Yes,” came the answer in an utterly

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expressionless voice. "It seems to me now that she was certainly my favorite child."

"Was that why you brought her up in such a way as this?"

"What way?"

She turned upon the *commissaire* a look so cold, so indicative of indomitable will, that he lowered his tone to a less challenging key.

"I don't wish to mention anything unpleasant. But this room—with its alcove it is practically a suite—impresses me as over-luxurious for a young girl.

"Look!" he went on, pointing. "A gilt bedstead with a silk canopy, Persian rugs on the floor, gilt panels with mirrors on the walls, like the palace at Versailles. It is out of keeping with the rest of the house, and I may say with your station in life."

"She was our eldest, m'sieu. No doubt we indulged her somewhat. Her father is rich even if we *are* plain people."

The *commissaire* took the now completed report of Forgeron, read it carefully, went to a large *garde-robe* and examined the

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varied examples of flimsy costliness which it contained, and returned to his witness.

“*Ouie, madame.* You indulged her as if she were a wealthy aristocrat. Didn’t you see the danger of such a course?”

“She was a good girl,” said the mother.

“As to that, I wish to say nothing. But tell me what you know of her death.”

“The others were here before I was—ask *them*. I am partially paralyzed and had to wait till my husband came and helped me downstairs.”

“And you know of no reason why your daughter should have been murdered?”

“She wasn’t murdered, m’sieu.”

“*Hein?*”

“She killed herself.”

Boussai stared. The *greffier* asked to have the answer repeated before he put it down. Madame Boncoeur complied, but refused to say another word. The commissaire finally gave her up and proceeded to the next room.

Jayne, ever since returning the key to Ninette’s side of the door, had been lying on



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her bed in a state bordering on collapse. She had exhausted her last bit of energy in persuading Charlotte, who had followed her, to leave her alone. She could still see the scene in the adjoining apartment. The report of the flash-powder had frightened her still further, and the sound of shuffling feet, as of men with coarse boots coming and taking away a burden, filled her with numb horror. But for the moment she was blessedly unable to think.

Boussai entered the room without knocking, but drew back when he saw the tear-stained face that was lifted in startled haste from the pillow.

*“Pardon, mademoiselle.”*

“What are you after?” demanded Jayne, scrambling to her feet. “I—I didn’t do it.”

“Nobody supposes you did. But since we are here, tell us just what happened. Did you hear or see anything in the night?”

“Only bad dreams.”

“And this morning?”

“I heard a crash—just after Charlotte



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had been here with my breakfast. I went out by—by the hall door——”

“Of course. The other door was locked on the farther side.”

“Yes. And I found my sister——”

“We know all about that. How many cakes did the maid serve you for breakfast?”

“Three. She always brings six, and I take half and Ninette takes half. I’d just eaten one and taken a drink of chocolate——”

“You don’t feel ill?”

“Ill?”

“That’s all, then. I suppose it’s useless to look for anything here.”

Nevertheless he did make a hasty inspection, saw that the shutters were seemingly fastened in the same manner as Ninette’s, and opened and shut one or two drawers.

“This is what a young lady’s room should be, Forgeron. Simple and modest. And the young lady seems to match.”

The burly inspector agreed, adding that

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this sort didn't get into trouble—with which they withdrew, closing the door after them.

Jayne leaned weakly against the wall. She had felt certain that there was going to be a search. Why had the idea filled her with terror? Why had she taken such pains to make it appear that nothing had passed from this room to the next?

“I don't know why I did it,” she whispered to herself. “There can't be anything wrong with the marrons. *He* gave them to me.”

She could hear voices in the hall. Charlotte was telling the *commissaire* how she brought Ninette the usual things at the usual hour, and found the girl well and even unusually happy.

“It was the same breakfast for both girls,” she sobbed, “and Ninette selected everything she wanted off of my tray with her own hands.”

Boncoeur and Noyeau explained how they had rushed to the scene in response to Charlotte's shrieks, but Mrs. Cuit was indignant

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that any question could be asked about the chocolate, since she had made it herself.

“Come into my kitchen and see if you can find pizen!” she boomed in a tremendous alto. “Or in the *épicerie* around the corner where I bought the cakes, for that matter.”

“There is no need to excite yourself,” said Boussai calmly. “We know already that Ninette didn’t touch the cakes, and the chocolate, as you say, was the same for both. No doubt it was excellent.”

Jayne could not repress a smile as she went over to her window. How strange death was. It didn’t come close to one, really, or in the least stand in the way of every-day affairs. The world outside, too, was wonderful with soft sunlight and astir with that gentle gayety which is the soul of Paris.

A figure was passing along the farther side of the quai. She watched it, struck with something familiar in the carriage of the shoulders. To her amazement, it turned at the corner and came back.

The fairy prince! What could have

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brought him there at such an hour? She had promised to meet him if possible that afternoon, but it was not yet ten o'clock. Certainly it wouldn't do to have him parading before that house filled with policemen. So she signaled him to walk on, and then hastily climbed down to the street, keeping close to the inner line of the sidewalk and as much out of the reach of prying eyes as possible.

"Somehow I couldn't keep away from the place," he explained, as he crossed to her side.

"I can't go with you now," she responded, resisting his effort to take her arm. "Something dreadful has happened."

"Were we seen yesterday?"

"No, no. But I can't stop to explain. You must get out of sight."

"I must know what it is, Jayne."

"Well, then—walk on towards the bridge. I'll meet you down by the water-side."

In her desperation she pushed him from her, and had the satisfaction of seeing him disappear by the flight of stone steps by the



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bridge-head. There was no one in sight but a group of dirty urchins playing some game which appeared to absorb all their faculties. She did not notice, as she put herself in her lover's wake, that the dirtiest one of the lot detached himself from his companions and began to amble with apparent aimlessness after her.

She found Benson sitting on a box half hidden by a pile of merchandise awaiting transportation.

"Nobody can see us here," he cried, jumping up as she approached. "It's perfect."

"Perfek's the woid!" chuckled the dirty urchin, who was now squatting like a toad in an interspace between two large bales not three yards away. His muttered soliloquy was couched in Eighth avenue English—a most curious language for one with all the outward marks of a Parisian *gamin*. But as nobody caught so much as one of its syllables, it failed to excite remark.

"My sister," Jayne broke out abruptly, "she—how can I tell you? She died this morning, very suddenly."

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Benson sank back to his seat.

“Of course, if I had known that—but you never told me she was ill.”

“She wasn’t ill, and I’m glad you came now. There is something——”

“You mean that it would be useless for me to get an introduction to your parents at present. Of course, dear, I understand that. I must go away.”

“Go away?”

“Yes. Don’t you see? If I’m in Paris I can’t keep out of sight. I would always be doing something wild and foolish, like I did this morning. We mustn’t continue to meet in secret. It would be certain to be found out and ruin everything.”

Jayne winced before this fresh calamity which threatened her, and for an instant she forgot everything in the fear that the miracle of the day before hadn’t really happened.

“Of course, if you want to go——”

Benson caught her in his arms. And, with the novelty of a lover’s kiss upon her lips, she felt the horror of the morning recede

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beyond a rosy mist which seemed to cover the world. With an effort she recalled herself to reality.

“You must let me speak. It isn’t right for us to love each other just now. Ninette isn’t only dead—she was poisoned. And—it’s all my fault—your marrons are still in the house.”

“My—what have my marrons to do with it?”

“Nothing, of course. Only I let Ninette have them last night—she asked me for them. If the police find it out, or even if they only find the marrons, I’ll have to explain how I got them. And they’ll investigate any story I tell. They might suspect that you——”

“Oh, impossible! Why, I gave them to *you*. What motive could I have had——”

He stopped, as if it had occurred to him that it might be said that the victim was not the intended one.

Jayne also remained silent. A cold shiver had gone through every atom in her body. For at Benson’s words, “I gave them to

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*you,”* she had remembered something. It was the exact circumstances under which the sweets were purchased. He had left her alone for a few minutes in the restaurant, and when he came back he had the box under his arm.

“I don’t want a present,” she had said—rather more positively than her feelings warranted.

And he had answered:

“Who is making you one? These are for your sister. It’s time I began to square myself with the family.”

She had thought he meant it as a joke, and yet—he had certainly seemed surprised when she first mentioned her name. Was it because he already knew Ninette? What if he was Ninette’s lover, unwilling to see her marry another, willing to take any means to prevent it and careless of what might happen through any miscarrying of his death-gift? Supposing that——

But what impossible nonsense she was thinking. Disloyal to the fairy prince



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already! She flung herself impulsively into his arms.

“I love you!” she murmured. “Promise me that you will never leave me.”

“I’m going to make you my wife,” Benson returned. “But it does seem as if I oughtn’t to see you for a while.”

“No, no! Promise! Promise! I could never go through what is going on at the house alone. I’ll get the marrons and throw them into the Seine. Then there’ll be no danger.”

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you. You might be followed, and that *would* make trouble. Where are they now?”

“In a drawer in my room. The men came to search, but they hardly looked anywhere.”

“Then leave them where they are. Who’d notice a box of candy in a girl’s room, anyway? And maybe you’re right about my staying. You will continue to see me?”

“Of course. What else is there for us to do except to meet each other when we have

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the chance? I need you more than ever now.”

“Then we’d better fix on a place further from the house. Do you know where *l’arène*, the Roman arena, is?”

“About—and I can find out.”

“You must be very careful.”

“We’ll both have to be careful, for if *maman* discovers that you’ve seen me behind her back she’ll forbid my marrying you. Then we’d have to run away and I couldn’t bring you any property.”

Having made which practical and altogether French remark, Jayne gave herself up to the bitter sweets of good-bye. At this moment the gamin was more than half-way back to the Boncoeur home.

## CHAPTER IV.

### LE SQUELETTE

**T**HE boy's ragged clothes attracted no attention in that dingy, middle-class quarter, nor did his bare feet make any noise upon the pavements. But his thoughts, had they echoed as loudly outside of his head as within it, would instantly have collected a crowd. For they ran something like this:

“Maybe yeh ain't de grand detective! Maybe not! De boss says, ‘Squelette,’ says he, an' dat's de French for Barebones, ‘Squelette, here's a house where a girl has been kilt. Stick aroun' an' keep yer eye peeled. Prob'bly yeh won't see nothing. But as yer head ain't as bony as yer legs, I think yeh can at least avoid bein' seen an' so spill-in' de beans.’ Has I seen anything? Oh, no! Is me bean solid iv'ry? I'll tell de woild it ain't.”

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This brought him in front of the window from which he had seen Jayne descend. The usual group of idlers which a mysterious tragedy always attracts was not in evidence, owing to the fact that the morgue wagon had come, like the policemen, by the back alley and given the sovereign people a false idea of its objective. But before he could even consider a plan of campaign, an old woman, her head bundled up in a shawl as if this were cold winter instead of a fine spring day, hobbled from a neighboring doorway and addressed him in French—French of a purity seldom heard even from the lips of women dressed in silks and satins.

“Boy,” she said, “you were about to climb in by that window. Don’t deny it. Now what is there in the house of M’sieu Boncoeur that you were making up your mind to steal?”

“Steal?” responded Le Squelette, hastily recovering himself. “W’y me fadder, de Lord Highmuckymuck, owns de house an’ all de houses around here. An’ I was just



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thinkin' of collectin' a little of de rent, may it please yer ladyship."

"Who taught you to speak like that?" the old woman demanded—for the urchin's remarks have been given here only in a crude translation which scarcely does them justice. "It is a good imitation of Parisian *patois*. But you're too impudent to be really French."

"Me noble fadder is responsible for de effect." Le Squelette made a mocking bow. "He gives me so many tooters at once dat I spick all de languidges wid a forrin' accint."

"Enough nonsense. You followed Jayne Boncoeur away from here. *I* saw you, if none of your playmates did, and followed you myself as closely as I dared. Now you're back again after something of hers. What is it? What has been going on in this house this morning?

"Well, then, if you've lost your tongue, go ahead with your rent-collecting. I'll stand here and signal when it's safe to come out.

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Sometimes two heads are better than one."

"An' w'at if I don't?"

The response was a torrent of abuse, so sudden and couched in such energetic terms that the boy could hardly believe his ears. Clearly this was an emergency which required heroic measures, for it would never do to stand there wrangling—with a policeman likely to appear at any instant. He glanced up and down the quai. The young companions he had so lately left were still within earshot. He lifted his voice.

"Gypsy! Gypsy!" he shouted, dancing quickly away from the Boncoeur gateway. "She says she'll turn us all into cats if we don't let her be."

His cries were answered by a chorus of whoops, and a dozen ragamuffins descended upon the hapless old woman like so many dogs on the scent of game. They raised a deafening clamor. They threw dust—and worse. Flesh and blood could not withstand such an onset, and the hag, after shaking an impotent fist and giving utterance to a string of curses which only increased the delight of

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her tormentors, started to hobble away. Soon the hobble developed into a surprisingly agile run, and Le Squelette, allowing himself to be distanced, stood and watched the disturbance disappear around a corner. Then he returned to the window.

It was still quiet there—for who pays any attention to the devilments of boys?—so he climbed up, swung Jayne's shutter open and leaped into her room. Ten seconds later he descended, closed the shutter behind him and strolled away, the box of marrons safe in his pocket.

“Dat was w'at yeh might call shavin' it thin,” he told himself. “Ought to have waited till night. But she'd a been home then. I really had to take de risk.”

After all, a risk once passed is no risk at all. The feat had been rather too simple, if anything. What was worse, there was still a flaw in its accomplishment. The *jeune fille* would return and know that she had been robbed. Now if he could only go and buy another box of marrons and put it where he had found the first——!

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The idea filled his soul with a glow of determination. This would be real art. But how was it to be done? His stock of legal tender at the moment consisted of one doubtful franc and two sous—a scarcity due to the game of chance which was at an unlucky crisis when Jayne first crossed his line of vision.

Meditating and walking slowly, he reached the rue Louis Philippe—only to find himself surrounded by the returning gamins.

“*Lâche!*” they cried.

“ ‘Fraid-cat!’ ”

“*Nous l’poursuiv’ jusqu’ pla’ St. Michel.*”

“Aw—*her!*” drawled Le Squelette scornfully in their own dialect. “Chasin’ an old woman. W’at’s dat? Come *awn*. I’ll show yehs some real chasin’.”

He was beset by demands to reveal his meaning, but he merely repeated:

“Come awn an’ I’ll show yehs.”

Leading the way, he crossed the Seine in front of the Palais de Justice and entered the great thoroughfare of the Latin Quarter known the world over as the *Boul Mich.*



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They came to a shop in whose windows there was a tempting array of sweets, including several boxes of candied marrons. Le Squelette halted.

Across the street near the entrance to the Luxembourg Gardens some workmen were leisurely engaged in tearing up the wooden block pavement. It was no unusual sight, for—perhaps because of an insurrectionary tendency handed down from the days of the French Revolution—the pavements of Paris never seem able to stay in place for any length of time. Le Squelette began to caper with delight.

“If I was to take a piece of pav’ment, smash a windeh wid it an’ grab a box of candy, who’d do de chasin’ then?” he enquired of his companions.

“*Fou!*”

“*Brageur!*”

“*Sans blague?*”

“Aw, yeh wouldn’t dare!”

“I’ll show yeh if I don’t dast,” he retorted. “Will yeh promise to scatter an’ yell?”

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“*Oui, oui, oui!*”

“It’ll be a cinch, then. Watch, now, an’ be ready.”

He possessed himself of a heavy block of wood, flung it without a moment’s hesitation through the show window, and snatched the biggest box of marrons in sight. His retreat through the gardens was masked by a bevy of frightened, half incredulous but altogether admiring accessories, screaming at the tops of their lungs and rushing in every direction for quarter.

Le Squelette ran as fast as his legs would carry him, left the gardens by the rue de Vaugirard, dived into the underground mazes of the Métro at the Odéon station—where luckily his doubtful franc passed muster—and did not ascend to the surface again till he found himself at Porte de Clignacourt.

There, walking beyond the *barrière*—that huge, picturesque but useless structure which makes Paris technically a fort—he sat down in a vacant field and waited for his heart to stop pounding his ribs. He had

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committed a fearful crime, and it was too soon yet to be proud of it.

But the grass was reassuringly green and untrampled; his position evidently far enough back from the road to guarantee a fair amount of privacy. A grin took the place of the blankly innocent look which had been drawn like a mask over his face, and—emitting a gurgling sound of satisfaction—he began to examine the proceeds of his two thefts.

From Jayne's box not more than two or three marrons had been taken. So he transferred a few pieces of the new stock to his mouth, emptied Jayne's box into his handkerchief, refilled it from his own box, and dumped the contents of the handkerchief into the spare receptacle. Jayne's box now contained the new marrons. He needed but to restore it to the room from which he had taken it.

But this was a task which might well have made a Napoleon hesitate. Not even Le Squelette, his blood having had time to cool, felt in any hurry to proceed. For one thing,



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he still had a feeling that the whole city between him and the Seine was swarming with outraged agents of the law, their entire vigilance concentrated upon himself. For another, he couldn't shake off the impression that during the earlier stages of his journey he had been followed.

So he pushed on farther into the country, found a roadside fishshop, and spent what remained of his franc upon a substantial meal. By the time he had made the trip back to the quai Béthune on foot, it was dusk. But still he hesitated. There were lights in the Boncoeur house, people were moving about, and nothing looked propitious.

The next few hours he spent down by the river, hiding in the very crevice among the merchandise which had served him earlier in the day, and endeavoring in vain to screw his courage up to the sticking point.

A bell in one of the towers of Notre Dame striking twelve woke him out of a nap and left him standing resolutely on his feet. It hadn't been cowardice, after all, which had



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been keeping him inactive, but merely a rudimentary sense of caution.

That night Jayne was roused by a soft, scraping sound. She had been dreaming that she was a mermaid, and that some invisible fishermen were trying to catch her in a net. The scraping at first had seemed to be that of the scales of her beautiful, fish-like body as she struggled in the meshes. But as she opened her eyes she thought she saw a figure by her bureau, bending over a drawer.

She screamed. The figure scampered away. Could it have been only a rat gnawing, and the rest pure imagination? But in less than a minute the room seemed full of people. First came Charlotte; then a chunky, stupid-looking police officer she had heard called Forgeron, who had stayed on after declaring a dozen times that his work there was done; finally her father and Pierre Noyeau.

“There was something here,” Jayne explained uncertainly. “At least I thought—it looked like a boy bent half-double and try-

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ing to walk on the tips of his toes. But I—I don't see him now."

Everybody agreed that it must have been a nightmare. Certainly there was no boy about, and how could he have got either in or out through locked shutters? Jayne was soon alone again—this time with a light burning.

Her first act was to examine the blind. Its staple hung dangling from the useless padlock. So the intruder had been real! Her fingers shook as she replaced the fastening, and for some time she did not dare look at the bureau. Since he had been bending over it when she caught sight of him, what could he have come for except the marrons?

To her immense relief she found them, apparently untouched, just where she had left them. But it no longer seemed a safe hiding-place. There was no safe hiding-place. What if she were to eat them?

She lifted one of the sweetmeats to her lips, only to put it aside with a sudden feeling of revulsion. She tried to find a comforting reason for her fears, to say that there

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might have been an insane clerk moved by a wanton desire for indiscriminate destruction at the shop where Benson had made his purchase. This was absurd. There remained the possibility that poison might have been introduced by accident during the process of manufacture. Even this was too far-fetched. The only one who could actually have poisoned the marrons was the fairy prince himself. And she was doubting him again.

“I’m going to prove my faith,” she whispered to the empty chamber, impulsively devouring one of the candies to the last crumb.

Immediately terror, like a searing flame, rushed through her whole being. It burnt up all the flowery fancies of her childhood, and under the pain of it—there, sitting on the edge of her bed, alone and helpless—the *jeune fille* became a woman.

“I’m unworthy of him,” she moaned. “I ought to die.”

And then, as the suspense grew less:

“But even if I knew he was guilty, I would love him—and die to save him.”



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So the minutes dragged on till the last shred of apprehension snapped and was gone. Jayne fell upon her knees, pouring out her thankfulness in a flood of tears.

“He is safe. He is innocent. I’ve been a silly little girl. There was nothing wrong with the marrons at all.”

And, repeating this reassuring statement at intervals, she ate the entire contents of the box—a feat not without its own risk to any but a youthful digestion—crawled back into bed and slept heavily the rest of the night.

Le Squelette was less happy, since from his standpoint the whole incident had gone wrong.

In the first place it had surprised him to find the outer shutter seemingly locked. In the morning it had yielded so easily to his touch that he had forgotten its existence—certainly he hadn’t expected to find it fastened, or even closed, on a night which was rather unseasonably warm. The readiness with which the fastening gave way was only partially satisfactory. One couldn’t return



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a drawn staple to its holes—not from the outside. So it was impossible to realize his plan of going and coming without leaving a single trace.

And afterwards, not being able to open a simple drawer without making a noise and bringing the whole house down about his ears—it made him blush with shame to think of it. Why, a little more and he would actually have been caught.

It was still possible, even likely, that nobody would suspect his substitution of one lot of marrons for the other, since he had had the presence of mind to close the drawer in spite of all. But not even the kindest critic could call it a clean job.

He paused beneath a street lamp—a long distance, be it said, from the Boncoeur home—and took out the one bit of solid evidence which proved that he hadn't altogether wasted his time. The original marrons! There they lay in the box to which he had transferred them.

But what was that adhering to one of the sticky morsels? A bit of paper, yellow—

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even brittle, as if hardly able any longer to hold itself together—and very neatly folded.

Sitting down on the curb, he carefully spread this perplexing find out upon his knee—unfortunately setting aside the candy box as he did so. It was a program, bearing across its top in large, fancy lettering the legend:

*Théâtre Châtelet*  
*L'Alouette*  
*in*  
*“La Fin de Folie”*

“Now w’at do yeh know about that!” he gasped as he read the date—“19 Jan., 1886.”

How could a program of thirty-six years ago have come where he had found it? He gave it up. Here, obviously, was something to be left to “de boss.”

Yet he perused it to the end, seeking for some enlightening detail in the long list of unknown names and characters. The work of decipherment rather tried his faculties, perhaps. Certainly he heard no footsteps—not a sound about him. But when he turned to where he had set the box on the curb beside him—*it was gone.*

## CHAPTER V

### A DISCREDITED OFFICIAL

“*L’AFFAIRE Boncoeur*” naturally created a sensation in the newspapers. The death of a young and beautiful woman under mysterious circumstances—here were all the elements of a *cause célèbre*. The writers spent more time in emphasizing the mystery than in trying to elucidate it. This was regular French journalism, and to be expected.

But the same papers contained almost equally voluminous accounts of the dismissal of one Lepadou, a chief inspector of the *Parquet*—or what would be called in America a Headquarters detective. “*Le Matin*” and “*La Liberté*” even published his picture. This was not so usual. It was even curious. For he had held no very important official position, and the cause given for his



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downfall—drunkenness and conduct unbecoming an officer—was sufficiently *bénal*.

However, as some of the writers pointed out, he had shown extraordinary ability during the short term of his service, and it was hinted that his real offense was that of having trodden on the toes of some obscure but powerful ambition. Played right, these cards might have brought about another *cause célèbre*, and won for the *ex-policier* a profitable revenge.

But Lepadou took his cup of mingled glory and disgrace philosophically. That is, he proceeded to justify the worst that had been said of him, and began to drink with spectacular and morose energy in the most public places he could find. Such conduct was even more remarkable than his sudden rise to fame.

And then, as if moved by some remaining trace of caution, he disappeared abruptly from public view. He had established himself, as a matter of fact, as one of the habitués of an obscure wine-shop—a shop, as it chanced, whose sign displayed two green



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dogs in an impossible leonine grouping. In this retreat he attracted no attention whatever. His once *chic* citizens' clothes, the regular wear of a detective *en bourgeois*, or without uniform, were by this time so dirty as to serve very fairly as a disguise. A neglected beard completed the transformation. And the barmaid merely saw that she had gained another good customer—one who ordered an inordinate amount of stimulant, paid without grumbling, and gave no trouble whatever.

One afternoon a few days later, Pierre Noyeau himself visited Les Deux Chiens—for Les Deux Chiens it was. The tragic death of his betrothed had made him a marked man in his usual haunts, and here he might expect to find peace and oblivion. He had been in the place before, for it was near home, and no one is adverse at times to a taste of strange surroundings. But the young manufacturer had a keen eye; and seeing Lepadou sitting alone in a shadowy corner, he at once recognized him from his published portrait.

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“M’sieu,” he began politely, moving after a moment’s hesitation towards the detective’s table, “I cannot help knowing who you are. Am I taking a liberty?”

Lepadou opened one bleary eye, roused himself, opened the other and spoke in a guttural sort of French smacking strongly of the southern provinces where they dwell upon their final e’s.

“Who in the devil’s name are you?”

“Pierre Noyeau, m’sieu, the *fiancé* of Ninette Boncoeur.”

Noting with surprise that the statement made no impression, he continued:

“Surely you know the name? The press has been sufficiently full of it.”

“And I’ve been sufficiently full of other things not to read the newspapers. What do you want?”

“Your help.”

Noyeau half rose and leaned forward across the table, his voice showing a barely controlled excitement.

“My fiancée is dead. Is it possible you have not heard of it? Can’t you give a few

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hours—even a few minutes of your time to helping me unravel one of the deepest mysteries which ever distressed a human being?

“Her mother claims that she took her own life, and the family, the police, even the newspapers seem to agree with her. But I know it isn’t true.”

“Since you know so much and are so familiar with my face, M’sieu Noyeau, I’m astonished that you’re not aware that you’re speaking to a private citizen. If you’re not satisfied with the way the case is being handled, why don’t you complain to the *commissaire*, the procureur de la république—or go to the devil?”

Lepadou made an impatient gesture as he spoke and sank back into his corner as if to resume his nap. Noyeau gave a low cry and shook him.

“The *commissaire* is an imbecile, a mere follower of routine, one of those who claim that she committed suicide rather than give herself to me. And how can I get the ear of the procureur?”

“If you would only listen, m’sieu. She



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was the most beautiful woman in Paris. Why should she kill herself? I adored her. We were happy. She was about to become my wife.

“What if some wretched cabal *has* dismissed you from the police? You are still the incomparable Lepadou. And I beg you to find out the truth—to crush these lies which are making it impossible for me to live.”

Noyeau produced a pocketbook and shoved several *billets de banque* across the table. The other stared at them undecidedly for a few minutes, swept them into his pocket and lounged over to a water-tap behind the bar, where he thoroughly soused his tangled hair. When he returned he looked more disreputable than before, but his eyes were shining—whether with avarice or intelligence it would have been difficult to say.

“*Parlez,*” he ordered. “What sort of a place is this Boncoeur house? Who lives in it?”

“It is a four-story building with one side facing the street, but opening only on a



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court-yard,” Noyeau plunged eagerly into his narrative. “The family occupies all but the ground floor, which is given over to the concierge and his wife—an old couple of unquestionable honesty. M’sieu Boncoeur owns the house, and indeed all the houses on the court, for though he lives very simply he is one of the most prosperous small manufacturers in France.

“His son died in early manhood a few years ago, and since then I have tried to take a son’s place in the business, as I soon hoped to do in the home. Madame Boncoeur is an invalid. She employs a maid and a cook, both old and trusted servants. There were two daughters—Jayne, who is nearly of age, and my Ninette, who was a year older. That is the entire household.”

He went on to describe the relative positions of the sisters’ rooms, and how Charlotte had served the *petit déjeuner* on the fatal morning. Lepadou interrupted.

“Tell me just how it was done. Did she have both breakfasts with her? Were they

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both on one tray? On two trays? I want details.”

“There was one large tray, m’sieu, with two breakfasts on it—a pot of chocolate and a plate of small cakes. Ninette was still in bed, but not asleep. The maid knocked, and she got up to unlock the door.”

“She slept with her door locked?”

“Always. There was a robbery in the house a long time ago and some of her things were taken. Since then the family has been timid.”

“Go on.”

“Well, Ninette unlocked the door and went back to bed, and while Charlotte held the tray she took what she wanted and put it on a small table by the bedside.”

“You mean she took the necessary dishes and so forth, poured out her own chocolate and helped herself to the cakes?”

“*Mais oui.*”

“But you’ve only the maid’s word for it. This Charlotte could have poisoned one of the cakes and given it to her.”

“There were no cakes missing,” said Noy-

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eau. "She was found to have eaten nothing."

"Charlotte's word again. She did the original counting."

"No, the cook's also. The cook prepared the chocolate and bought the cakes. There were a dozen. Six were left in the kitchen. Three were served to Jayne—she corroborates Charlotte's testimony as to this. Three were found in Ninette's room untouched. An analysis has revealed nothing wrong either in the cakes or in the chocolate adhering to the remains of the broken cup."

"What broken cup?"

"The cup which Ninette took from the tray. It lay beside her on the floor where she had fallen. Yet the autopsy shows cyanide poisoning."

Noyeau started to describe the alarm and the position in which the body was found, but again the detective broke in.

"Have the authorities found out where the girl could have obtained the poison? Cyanide is not sold everywhere and to everybody, like sugar-plums."

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“Unfortunately,” resumed Noyeau, lifting a grief-contorted face, “she often visited her father’s *usines*. He is, I omitted to state, a chemical manufacturer, and poisons there are—like sugar-plums as you say.”

“Then you haven’t any evidence that the police are wrong?”

“No; that is why I appeal to you. The evidence points to suicide. But in my heart I know that all these appearances are the result of devilish cunning.”

“Whose?”

“I cannot say. She was so sweet and lovely that it is hard to believe she could have had an enemy in the world. But may it not have been her very loveliness which destroyed her?”

“She had a secret lover, you mean?”

“Not a lover, but one who loved her—who killed her rather than see her given to me. We know she wasn’t poisoned by the breakfast. But what if somebody had sent her—a box of candy, for instance?”

“Was a box of candy found in her room?”

“No.”



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“Then there’s no sense in that. Silly to suppose things that don’t ’xist.”

Lepadou was struggling to keep his eyes open, but the fumes of alcohol seemed once more to be mounting to his brain.

Noyeau sighed despairfully.

“I had hoped, m’sieu, that you would see clearly where I can only feel. But come at least and look over the place. A thousand unnoticed things might speak to you. Everybody knows that you can discover much that is hidden from common men.”

The detective beckoned to a waiter, ordered another drink, and when he had poured it down his throat replied succinctly:

“Listen. I’m sober now for a minute, and I’m sorry for you. Naturally you can’t imagine a nice young girl who lets you kiss her not wanting to be your wife. But what can you know, with your little experience, about the heart of a *jeune fille*?

“You are her father’s right-hand man. You were set on the marriage. The parents were set on the marriage. The girl, dutifully brought up, was made to think that *she*

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was set on the marriage. And all the while she can't bring herself to it—finds out, at the critical moment, that she would rather die.

“You want to think she was murdered. But your own story points all the other way. Servants old and trustworthy, girl locked in her room, ate no breakfast, no poison found anywhere but in her stomach, and she could get cyanide any time at her father's factories—it's suicide plainly enough. You'll have to get over it.”

Lepadou fell back against the wall, as if the last glass, momentarily stimulating, had been the final straw and broken the back of sobriety altogether. Pierre Noyeau regarded him silently for several minutes, then got up and left the wine-shop.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE DEATH CUP

**W**HEN his visitor had gone, Lepadou began to behave in a remarkable manner for a drunken man. Instead of falling yet deeper into sleep, he drew himself together, paid his bill and sallied out into the street, his legs growing steadier with every step. One might have thought that his debauch had awakened his conscience, for he made straight for the cathedral.

The interior of Notre Dame at this hour was nearly dark save for here and there a bunch of candles burning before some shrine. The detective took a candle from a supply awaiting devotees near the entrance, dropped the price of it into the slit of a contribution-box, and continued up the north aisle.

Reaching the transept, he paused and looked around. The immense building was

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empty. There may, indeed, have been a dozen people kneeling at the different altars, but so intent were they upon their prayers that they counted no more than so many additional pieces of statuary. No one had paid him the slightest attention.

He approached the foot of a tower-like pulpit near the choir, thrust an elbow against one of the panels, and disappeared. For the panel was hinged, and gave upon a tiny cubby-hole used to hide the athletic contortions of the man who kept the bellows of the great organ filled during service time.

Lepadou had noted this man on a visit to the cathedral several weeks before, and—the panel chancing to be open—had been interested in the quaint contrivance—two great treadles, from one to the other of which the operator continually shifted his weight—that still defied such modern innovations as the automatic motor.

Now, however, the nook became the scene of activities modern in the extreme. The candle was lighted and stuck to a projecting beam. A pocket case containing a bottle of



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liquid soap, a lather brush, a safety razor, a tiny clothes brush and several other toilet articles was produced. The neglected growth of beard disappeared, the dust-covered coat and trousers became respectable, the dirty slouch hat of indescribable coloring transformed itself when turned the other side out into a head-covering of decent black.

At the same time the detective's very features seemed to undergo a change. His facial muscles altered like wax under a modeler's fingers, giving rise to a novel arrangement of elevations, depressions, creases and those thousand and one other details by which man ordinarily identifies his fellow beings. The very set of his ears appeared to be different, and when a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles had added a last touch to the metamorphosis, he looked for all the world like a slightly seedy middle-aged gentleman, trained for one of the learned professions but compelled by stress of circumstances to earn a difficult living as a private tutor to dull students who needed a crutch on their march for academic honors. At the same

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time there was not an observable trace of make-up, for the art of disguise as practiced to-day by those who chiefly use it—the master *fileurs* of the French police—has long since abandoned everything savoring of the theater.

With a forlorn sort of dignity, Lepadou set out towards the quai Béthune, bowing to the few he met like a would-be celebrity and occasionally pausing under some lamp to read a book which he had taken from his pocket. The pose of half-cracked *savant*, carefully cultivating eccentricities in the hope of being mistaken for one of the great, was so perfect that several passers-by were unable to repress a smile.

Near the corner of the rue de l'Hôtel de Ville he came upon an urchin playing by a small mud-puddle in the gutter.

“Splash my boots, Squelette,” he let fall in English, while seeming to be absorbed in his volume. “And as I’m scolding you, make your report.”

The boy picked up a bit of board, brought it down smartly upon the surface of the pud-

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dle, and squealed ecstatically at the damage which ensued.

But he didn't feel ecstatic. This was the second time he had been called upon to report since the unaccountable disappearance of the box of candied chestnuts, and his conscience troubled him.

For he had omitted mentioning the exploit at all, hoping that luck would soon enable him to recover the lost evidence. He felt sure that the gypsy had it. No ordinary human being, he reasoned, could have played him such a trick. Yet he trembled hourly for fear he might hear of the sweets through a trail of death left behind them among perfectly innocent people. Between the absence of such news and the continued invisibility of the old woman with a shawl, the boy led a miserable existence.

But how could he even now recount an adventure which had begun so brilliantly and ended in such a disgraceful fashion? He couldn't. An artist's pride held him back. So he merely splashed the water and howled, according to orders.



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“Confound your impudence, you’ve ruined my clothes!” cried Lepadou, seizing the urchin in mock fury by the collar.

“*Laissez faire, m’sieu. Ca n’ fait rien,*” squawked the ragamuffin.

Then under his breath in Eighth avenue-ese:

“Dey ain’t nothin’ to report exceptin’ two things. But they’s kind of funny.”

“What two?”

“Don’t choke me, boss. *De commissaire* says it’s suicide, and——”

“I know that. But presumably the *commissaire* isn’t such a fool as not to be able to say one thing and mean another.”

“Well, anyway he’s pretendin’ to think it’s suicide, an’ yet he’s keepin’ out of de papers de one t’ing yeh might say goes to prove it. For de ’topsy showed dat dis young Miss Ninette was—aw, it ain’t just de t’ing t’ say.”

“Say it, nevertheless.”

“Well, she was either married or a wild ’un, as everybody ’d a knowed soon if she hadn’t died.”



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“How did you learn all this?”

Lepadou released the boy's collar and began to busy himself with his clothes brush. Le Squelette knelt down and wiped his victim's shoes with a dirty handkerchief, apparently experiencing regret.

“I got a job wid de concierge runnin' errands, an' I heered de *commissaire* and de doctor talkin'. But dey didn't see me, 'cause I was hid in de dirty-clothes basket.”

“Good work. And what's the other funny thing you learned?”

“It's de way the fam'ly cottons to de suicide t'eory. All of 'em seems to like it.”

“I know one who doesn't seem to.”

“Who? W'at've yeh found out, boss? Yeh must be up to somethin' or yeh wouldn't be hidin' out so far from de place.”

“It isn't very far, and I wasn't hiding so well that—say a very shrewd and observant person couldn't find me.”

“Someone who was lookin' for yeh, eh?”

“Perhaps. But I'm afraid I didn't dive deep enough. Along comes Pierre Noyeau this afternoon and spots me right off.”

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“Him? Golly! Maybe *he's* been keepin' his eyes open. Maybe he *done* it.”

“Committed the murder, you mean, and then looked me up and handed me out a story calculated to make me lose interest in the case?”

“Gee! What story 'd he tell yeh, boss?”

“He pretended to think it was murder, and gave only facts pointing to suicide. What do you say to calling it a clever attempt to make me think it *was* suicide?”

“Yeh're right, boss. It's him, and——”

“And he killed the wealthy girl he was engaged to—he, the one person that her condition needn't offend—so as to keep himself from falling heir to her father's fortune, I suppose?”

Le Squelette clenched his fists and stamped with his feet, on the verge of angry tears.

“Yeh've been stringin' me again. I alwus forgets de motive. W'at d' yeh want to git me goin' for?”

Lepadou chuckled.

“It's all right, old scout. But you'd better go on with your story.”

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“It’s only dis. If dey believed she really done it herself, wouldn’t it scare ’em? Dey’s all more or less relig’us, an’ wid de relig’us, I alwus thought, suicides is supposed to go to de hot place. Now Jayne——”

Le Squelette broke off, undid his polishing with another splash from the puddle and started away, whooping like an Indian. He had caught sight of the *commissaire’s* inspector, the slow-moving, ponderous Forgeron, looming in the distance.

“Has that *p’tit gosse* been spatterin’ you?” demanded the inspector, hurrying forward just in time to dodge a mud-ball flung with major league accuracy at his head. “*Mille pipes de diables!* I’ll learn him——”

“You couldn’t catch him, I’m afraid,” said Lepadou, touching the other’s arm. “And—don’t you know your friends?”

Forgeron started, then flushed with mortification, for he saw his interlocutor smile and with the smile all his figure slowly relax and a familiar countenance rise before his eyes out of a set of features that had seemed entirely strange.

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“*You!*” he exclaimed, in a tone not unmingled with awe.

“Yes, and you’d better not be seen talking with me. It might not do you any good to have it reported at headquarters.”

Forgeron looked hurt.

“There’s some that may feel that way about it. But there’s a good many more that’d be proud to be seen in your company. And I ain’t forgotten how you went out of your way more’n once to do me a friendly turn.”

“In that case—but I’d rather not stand talking here on my own account. Isn’t there a place where we can go for a private chat? I’m looking for information.”

An eager invitation having been given and accepted, they were soon in the *inspecteur du commissariat*’s own quarters, a bachelor establishment near Place Sebastapol, though Lepadou insisted on lagging half a block behind all the way. Forgeron barely waited for his arrival before peeling off his coat and getting busy with a complicated assortment of skillets, saucepans and pots over a gas



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stove that stood in one corner of the single room, proudly announcing that he did his own cooking, and prophesying that dinner wouldn't be found "altogether bad for a bit of police work."

Lepadou, after taking one mouthful of the *ragoût* which was shortly placed before him, laid down his knife and fork.

"Forgeron," he cried, "I've always liked you. But you couldn't detect the Louvre if somebody should happen to mislay it. And here I find you've got a streak of real art in you all the time. What do you mean by hiding it? And why don't you leave crook-chasing to whelps like me that are good for nothing else?"

The host tried to conceal his satisfaction, but failed. His suggestion of a possible defect discoverable in the salad was crude in its insincerity. Finally he let a broad grin have its way with his features.

"I reckon I can put together a recipe now and then, for a fact," he admitted as he sat down. "Hope you'll like the seasonin' of them potatoes. First boil 'em, then, when

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they're cold, put 'em on an asbestos lid to stew—slow, that's the secret—with milk and butter and plenty of salt and pepper. The flavor must be cooked in, understand? After that, you've only got to heat 'em up and there's something to eat and no trouble. But let's hear about you. The story that you've been fired for bein' drunk doesn't go down."

"I've been trying to cook up a dish of my own," responded Lepadou, falling to. "You might call it a *bouillabaise*. I've got the recipe, but I haven't got the fish."

"Fish?"

"Yes. So I've been setting nets. I began in 1910, and haven't a thing yet to show for my trouble."

"You don't mean 1910?"

"I do. I was a young man in New York then, working on one of my first murder cases. Don't know why I should be telling you all this. I've taken pains enough to keep my identity rather in the dark. But a man must talk things over with somebody now and then, and you are the only one I

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seem to feel like trusting—on this side of the water, that is.”

“Go on,” said Forgeron.

“Well, the victim was a young girl, just as in this Boncoeur case. She was found dead with a lot of broken china around her. There was never any conviction—but later there was another murder. Young girl again. Broken china again. And again no conviction. Do you see what kind of a dish I’m trying to concoct?”

“I see you think it was the same shark both times. And you’re still trying to cook—catch him, that is?”

Lepadou nodded, helped himself to more potatoes, and continued:

“After a while there was a third murder, and this time I was able to examine into it more thoroughly. I even thought I spotted my shark. Rufus Marle he called himself. He disappeared, and I followed him to Europe. Luckily I’d learned to speak French as a boy—from an old nurse born in the Bouches du Rhone country. So I went to Marseilles. As soon as I dared to risk it,



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I began to pass myself off as a Frenchman, and came to Paris. I'd had some official dealings with the Chief of Police, and he secured me an appointment. I wanted all the machinery of the service at my call."

"It was clever," said Forgeron, with the air of one delighted to be initiated thus into the circle of secret politics.

"Clever maybe. But it didn't work. Your infernal newspapers got hold of some minor cases that I'd taken up just for the looks of things, and made me conspicuous. It was like going about with a brass band. I had to play drunkard and cocaine fiend and get myself discharged."

"Then you're really not out?"

"I am. But I don't believe you're seriously risking your future by having me to dinner."

"Clever!" repeated Forgeron, beginning to pour the coffee. "But if this Marle is worth going to all this trouble just to throw dust in his eyes, he must be——"

"Wait! Did you ever hear of a French crook called Le Caillou?"



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“Hear of him? The man that’s said to butcher women for the fun of it? There’s a standing reward of fifty thousand francs for his capture, offered by one of the newspapers. He got his nickname because folks say he has no more heart than a flint.”

“No, Forgeron, his nickname came from his faculty of disappearing like a pebble thrown into a pond and leaving only ripples behind it. Caillou means pebble as well as flint.”

“Maybe so. But he’s only a humbug, anyway. Nobody ever set eyes on him.”

Lepadou leaned forward towards his host.

“Nobody *thinks* they ever set eyes on him, because nobody knows who he really is or what motive actuates him. And people used to say that the sea-serpent was a humbug. They thought it too horrible to be real. Now we know that it’s the giant squid. Marle is even more like a squid than like a shark, for the squid hides his trail in darkness of his own making—squirts a sort of ink into the water, you know.”

“But do you really mean he’s Le Caillou?”

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There aren't always broken dishes in the Caillou cases."

"There's always a broken *something*. Last time it was a butter crock. And Le Gaillou was never heard of in France till Marle ceased to be heard of in America.

"When I first came over here, I couldn't pick up a paper without imagining I saw traces of The Squid's work in one of the items, and I haven't got over the idea of one of his tentacles being always near me even yet. Do you observe that I'm sitting with my back to the wall? I've had some funny experiences which made me think that I wasn't doing all the fishing, and it's been a long while since I was able to see an unexpected shadow fall over my shoulder without a chill going down my back. Why, even since I've been sitting here I've been thinking what enormous hands you have, and how easily you could strangle me if you caught me off my guard."

Forgeron laughed boisterously — and helped himself to a second glass of the liqueur which served as a *pousse café*.

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Lepadou went on:

“You remember the morning the body of this Ninette Boncoeur was found?”

“The twenty-third.”

“Well, late in the afternoon of the twenty-second, I got on the track of a man I thought might be Marle. Don’t know why I thought so unless it was something crooked about his arms and legs that I’d noticed in another suspect once before. He didn’t look at all like the Marle I had a glimpse of once or twice in America. But I’ve long since given up going by appearances, and I followed him.

“That night he walked all over Paris with me at his heels. Nothing happened till he came to the quai Béthune. There he hesitated and looked up at a certain window. That was all. And afterwards I lost him. He simply walked into a residence up near L’Etoile, using a latch-key.”

“Whose residence?”

“It doesn’t matter. The man who lives there is one of the best-known statesmen in France, and no criminal, I assure you. My



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first man must simply have dissolved en route and left me to pick up the statesman's trail without knowing the difference, for I rang the bell and found that it was really he who had just come in.

“The next morning I was prowling around that house on the quai Béthune when I heard cries. It turned out to be the Boncoeur house. I managed to find out what had happened—even saw you and Boussai arrive. And soon the papers were out with the particulars, together with a lot of nonsense about myself. What do you think of it?”

Lepadou's voice had become weirdly thin and harsh. Forgeron got up, fussed with the gas—his ménage didn't boast electricity—and complained that the light was poor. His face had taken on a sallow tinge.

“It's nonsense,” he declared. “But I don't like it. It gives me the shivers.”

“What gives you the shivers?”

“This talk of yours about giant squids and getting on the track of murders before they happen. Because lately I've had——”

“You've had similar experiences?”



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“Not exactly. But I’ve had the notion in one or two cases that we weren’t gettin’ to the bottom of things.”

For several minutes nothing more was said. In the silence the hissing of the gas-jet overhead, at first inaudible, grew to a roar. The sounds made by a pedestrian passing in the street had a startling distinctness. It was Forgeron who finally spoke.

“Ninette Boncoeur was certainly murdered—and without ever knowin’ what was coming. Suicides’ faces don’t smile the way hers did. Boussai never says anything, but it’s easy to see what he thinks from the way he keeps up the watch at the house. What I can’t figure out is how it was done.”

Lepadou, who had noticed his companion’s failure to mention a certain detail of the medical report, wondered if that also could have been kept from him, but all he said was:

“Where is the cup into which Ninette poured the chocolate?”

“Right here in this room, but there’s nothing wrong with it. The chemist was very

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thorough. He washed not only the cup but the plate, the spoon and the napkin—everything separately, putting all the pieces of each dish in a basin of water by themselves and then analyzin' the water."

"But may I see it?"

"*Certainement.*"

Forgeron unlocked a closet and brought out a wooden box into which the fragments of the broken china had been deposited. Sorting the pieces of the cup from the other débris, he laid them carefully upon a vacant section of the tablecloth.

"He discovered nothing?" asked Lepadou.

"No."

"Yet I have."

"What?"

"That the newspapers were right in describing this as very fine china—'an antique, artistically decorated and costing considerable money,' one of them said."

"Ha-ha! Yes, them fellows are exact. I thought you meant something serious, though I knew there couldn't be anything

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wrong with the cup. That's why I didn't take the trouble to turn it in at the commissariat."

"Did you ever try to put it together?"

"No, I——"

"You didn't, which was very natural because you had no idea of what to expect. Let's try it now."

With which remark he began to adjust fragment after fragment to its proper place, moving slowly and with great care so as not to impair the delicate edges of fracture, while Forgeron, looking somewhat bewildered, kept the work together by making a supporting cup of his hands. When finished, the reconstruction stood perfect, and only needed a little cement to be serviceable again.

"But there are fourteen pieces here!" exclaimed Lepadou, counting.

"Yes, there were fourteen in the inventory."

"You're certain of that?"

For answer Forgeron with an air of considerable injury produced a notebook and pointed to the entry:



## THE DEATH CUP

“*One cup of fine chinaware, broken into fourteen pieces.*”

“But,” objected Lepadou, “there only ought to be thirteen.”

Forgeron guffawed.

“If you ain’t been makin’ me *walk* all of this time! I might have known you was jokin’. Lookin’ for an unlucky number! You got me good.”

But seeing that his guest had become lost in thought, he put the relics of the crime back in the closet and began to clear away the dinner. Then he set a tiny alarm-clock, pulled off his boots, threw himself down on the bed and was soon snoring.

It was past eleven when the clock, with a clatter entirely disproportionate to its size, aroused the two men—one from his nap and the other from his meditations.

“Come along with me,” said the refreshed giant. “I’ve got to go on watch at the Boncoeurs’ and can pass you in as one of us. We can easily arrange it so the man I relieve won’t see you.”

“It’s very good of you,” yawned Lepadou,



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lighting a cigarette. "But my time belongs to the giant squid."

"You said it was The Squid you tracked to the quai Béthune. I thought——"

"Coincidence and imagination. If it had been The Squid, that cup of yours, I tell you, would have had thirteen pieces. I'm going to say good-night."

Leaving the other staring at him uncertainly, Lepadou picked up his hat and started off. The streets were very quiet, for it had begun to rain and a chilly wind from the north kept late pleasure-seekers under cover. He noted the unusual absence of pedestrians. It was an odd chance to find himself in that comparatively busy section so absolutely alone.

An impulse to look behind him seized him so suddenly that he resisted it.

"I'm getting childish," he told himself. "This is what comes from burning the candle at both ends. I need a few weeks' rest."

But being disinclined to go to his lodgings, and having no immediate destination in view, he was unconsciously following the

## THE DEATH CUP

route to the quai Béthune. It was difficult, even now that he had decided to throw up the case, to get his thoughts away from it. He had definitely decided that it had nothing to do with Marle, and for reasons much more clear than any he had confided to Forgeron. But his interest persisted, and this preoccupation naturally guided his steps.

Some small object upon the sidewalk, struck by his foot, went tinkling several paces in advance, and when he came to it again he stooped to see what it was. As he did so, the vague threat of his surroundings manifested itself in tangible form.

*“Pin-n-g!”*

A winged bit of metal sang past his ear.

There was no report—nothing in all the wide world to be heard save the lingering echo of that ill-aimed bullet. Ill-aimed? If he had not happened to stoop at just the right instant to pick up what proved to be merely a two-sous piece, he would in all probability have been shot through the head.

But there was now the sound of hurrying

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footsteps, and turning he saw Forgeron running to overtake him.

“Did you hear that?” panted the veteran. “Something went past me. I thought it was a bullet.”

“I heard *something*. Where were you? Did you see anybody?”

“I was just this side of the corner back there, and not a soul was in sight. It must have been fired from an air-gun.”

“Then,” said Lepadou, “it looks as if I was hot on the trail—though what trail I don’t know. Somebody’s disturbed. I’ll have to look further into this Boncoeur business after all.”

## CHAPTER VII

### IN NINETTE'S ROOM

**A**N investigation of the neighborhood resulted in nothing. So they proceeded on their way. Forgeron went ahead to relieve the watch, and when the coast was clear Lepadou was quietly admitted into Ninette's room, which was fairly ablaze with electric lights.

“And this,” exclaimed the detective, “is what the journalists almost unanimously describe as ‘a chamber extravagantly decorated in bourgeois taste!’ ”

“Papa Boncoeur must certainly have made the money fly where his eldest daughter was concerned,” assented Forgeron, seating himself in an ornate but substantial chair. “Look at her dresses in the wardrobe over there. Silks, laces, spangles—you never saw the like.”

“But who furnished the ideas?” snapped



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Lepadou impatiently. "Papa Boncoeur hadn't anything to do with it, or it would have been as ugly as it is extravagant. It's unconventional, true enough, but it's beautiful. Doesn't that suggest anything?"

"Art is out of my line," admitted Forgeron.

"Well, well. I dare say you're right, though where there is art there must have been an artist somewhere, and one doesn't usually find them in the homes of the newly-rich middle-class. How's the rest of the house?"

"Plain as plain."

"Jayne's room?"

"Plainer."

"Hm! It's a queer case. But let me see everything you found here."

Forgeron produced a key and was about to get up. Lepadou prevented him, took the key himself, and went over to an *escritoire* which the other indicated.

"Tison brand," he observed, taking a box of matches from a drawer which he had un-

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locked. "Why haven't you kept these under seals?"

"I—why, none of them were burned. The poison couldn't have come from them."

Lepadou held up one of the matches—which was short, thick-set, rather like tiny specimens of the plant called the cat-tail—and struck it on the box. It burned for a full ten seconds with a white, sputtering flame, then went abruptly out.

"It's a suggestive sort," he remarked. "Of course you know what they're for?"

"Yes—to use in the wind. You can't blow 'em out."

"Exactly. And consequently in Paris, where there is seldom a high wind, they are very far from common. Most people dislike the Tison, for if you're not used to them you wait instinctively for the chemical to burn off—and find yourself with a dead stick in your hand before even trying to get a light. Not the style of match you'd expect to find in a young lady's possession. Mademoiselle Boncoeur cannot have smoked out of doors. It's my opinion that she has recently paid a

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visit to the south, where the *mistral* blows so much that often you can get no matches but Tisons in the shops. And here's a box of Levant cigarettes."

"They've been examined, too," insisted Forgeron. "She seems to have been gettin' ready for a smoke, but was waitin' for breakfast before startin' in."

"But Levants are also common in the south. Do you know if she had been away lately?"

The giant blinked awkwardly.

"I didn't ask, and I haven't heard anybody say. It ain't me that's in charge of this case."

"Of course not," said Lepadou. "You'd never have overlooked two tricks like these if you'd been relying upon yourself."

He returned to the *escritoire* in time to hide a smile, but found nothing further until, having locked the first drawer, he opened another. There, under a litter of odds and ends, was a scrap-book.

Evidently it was a relic of childhood, for it began with several pages of colored pic-



## IN NINETTE'S ROOM

tures unskillfully pasted on. But page by page the art in arranging and selecting bettered. Then came a period in which mere picture-cards gave place to studies in black and white from the art papers, and these to newspaper clippings—chiefly poetry.

The date attached to the clippings showed that the book had been abandoned by its owner several years ago. But the last clipping of all was of a different character, and seemed to bear no date. Lepadou, still standing by the *escritoire*, perused it carefully, then read aloud:

*“Much excitement was caused last evening at the landing of the Bateaux Parisiens at St. Cloud by the reckless conduct of a young woman. She was unescorted, and attempted to board the boat just as it was leaving the pier for its final trip to Auteuil, where it connects with the Paris line. Nobody seems to have noticed her until she appeared at the waterside on a run and tried to leap the chasm which already yawned between the planking and the moving steamer.*

*“A guard tried to stop her, but she was*



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*too quick and dashed through the gate. As a result she succeeded in precipitating herself into the water. Several men immediately leaped to her rescue, and she was finally returned to the landing—after a frantic struggle, during which she persisted in trying to make towards the receding boat.*

*“And now another peculiar feature of the incident developed itself. The woman, who was fashionably, even extravagantly dressed, and of an extraordinary beauty—all the witnesses are agreed as to this, as well as to her extreme youth—stood for a few moments apparently dazed in the midst of a little crowd which had by this time collected on the pier. Then she suddenly made for a passing tram, rode for half a block and jumped off. From this point all efforts to trace her were unavailing.*

*“Richly garbed pulchritude is no rare thing at St. Cloud, but it is usually less eager to catch the last boat home. If the thing is to become a craze the number of guards will have to be doubled.”*

*“ ‘Fashionably, even extravagantly*

## IN NINETTE'S ROOM

dressed, and of an extraordinary beauty,' ” mused Lepadou aloud. “What if it were Ninette Boncoeur, herself?”

“I thought of that when I first read it,” said Forgeron. “But it calls her a young woman. Ninette couldn't have been more than a little girl when she made that scrap-book.”

“She was only a little girl when she began it. But this item has no date, and nothing comes after it. I should say from the looks of the paper, too, that it was much more recent than the others.

“Let us assume that the young woman *was* Ninette, for the sake of argument,” continued Lepadou, looking at his companion over his shoulder. “What could she have been doing at St. Cloud at that time of night?”

“Why, maybe——”

“Yes, if there had been a man with her it's exactly the right distance from Paris to make the explanation only too easy.”

“She may have been expectin' one.”

“Good. And she waits for him, we'll say,

## THE BONCOEUR AFFAIR

till it's too late to catch the last boat back. A dreadful predicament for a respectable young lady. She tries to make the boat at any cost, and fails. Then she adopts the first means which offers to escape the crowd and possible recognition.

“But she is drenched to the skin. It may have been winter time—three or four months ago, for instance. Probably she has no great amount of money with her. If she takes a cab—supposing that she can find one at that hour—it will cost her a pretty penny. Besides, she will freeze. To make the journey by tram in her drenched condition is even more impossible. So she would look for a room—a cheap one if necessary—some place where she could hide and find warmth and the means of drying her clothes. There she would spend the night, with money enough for the tram in the morning.”

“She might telephone,” put in the *commissaire's* inspector.

“Yes, but would she? There are difficult explanations to make. More likely she puts them off—tries to give herself time to think



## IN NINETTE'S ROOM

of some plausible story which will spare her lover, if she has one, as well as herself. This delay makes matters worse, and to this day there must remain in her home the tradition of a dreadful row, tears and recriminations. If I were you I'd try to get the particulars. It couldn't altogether have escaped the servants."

"Easily said," retorted Forgeron, rising and stretching his legs. "Charlotte, the maid, is about as talkative as an oyster. As for the cook—ten thousand devils! I tried to make up to her the first day I was here, and she nearly laid my head open with a skillet."

"You tried to make love to her, you mean?"

"Well, you know how it is. She isn't much older than I be, and they do say I've got the figure of a man. Many's the time I've found out that honey's better than vinegar for catching flies. But Mrs. Cuit hasn't got no sentiment."

Lepadou's face wrinkled as he wheeled



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about and critically inspected his ponderous companion.

“In your place,” he got out finally, “I’d never waste honey on a cook. Better try her with your *ragoût*—and talk as one artist to another.”

“It might work,” said Forgeron, doubtfully. “But I must go now and have a talk with the concierge to see if everybody is in.”

Left to himself, Lepadou returned to the clipping and soon discovered a date very faintly penciled on the margin. As he had guessed, it was of a day but a few months back. He felt certain now that he had interpreted the St. Cloud incident correctly. But what did it signify? Who was this secret lover—if lover he were—whom she had gone to meet and failed to find at the rendezvous? The question admitted of no answer from any information as yet to hand, and must be postponed till later. Meanwhile of more immediate interest was the sound of shuffling footsteps descending the stairs.

The detective switched off the light, and

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had retreated on tiptoe to a corner just as the door opened to admit an old man. In the few ghostly rays from the street lamps—rays creeping through the chinks of the shutters to become the sport of the mirrored wall-panels—he looked to be eighty, with locks of straying hair, gray perhaps in the day time, but now of a silvery white.

“I thought I heard voices,” he mumbled as he moved uncertainly about the room. “There is always someone around. What are they looking for? I know! I know! In a house like this there *ought* to be voices.”

He took a step forward, then hesitated.

“It must be in here. But no—I forgot. Poor little Ninette. It was all *Le Glaçon*’s doings from the start. I never approved of it. *Le Glaçon*! The icicle. The servants’ tongues are loose to-day. I hadn’t heard that name in years. How it fits her. And yet I used to think——”

He drew back, as if sensing the presence of another in the room.

“Who’s there?” he called.

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Then after a silence, and in a wavering key:

“It couldn’t have been anything. I’ll have a lot of policemen running after me if I don’t look out. They’re probably in the house now trying to earn their salaries. Much good it will do them if they haven’t found out already. It’s too late.”

He felt along the wall, as if for the light switch.

“I’d like to see Ninette just once more, but I hate to look at this room. It was an awful system. Ruined—body and soul. But of course she isn’t here now. I’m growing childish. What good would it do, talking to the dead, anyway?”

He gave up looking for the switch, and stood irresolute.

“Le Glaçon! Cold, cold, cold. She was always like that. Everything seems to be getting cold. I can feel myself ice all over.”

Without another word he turned, shut the door behind him, and could be heard re-ascending the stairs, his loose slippers clicking at his heels.



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The detective shivered, as if the cold he had just heard spoken of were real.

“Ugh! That was spooky,” he muttered, turning on the electrics.

Too late, he regretted it, for other steps were approaching—rapid, nervous steps this time. He was just quick enough to slip into the *garde-robe* before the second intruder entered.

It was a woman, sparely built and middle-aged, with the dress and manner of a servant. She did not mutter as the other had done, but walked straight to the *escritoire*, of which she tried one of the drawers. It was one which Lepadou had unlocked, and it was half out before a soft voice called from the adjoining chamber:

“Charlotte, is that you?”

“Yes, Jayne, dear. Why aren’t you asleep?”

“I thought I heard somebody talking,” said Jayne, putting her head through the connecting door, which Charlotte had unlocked and opened. “Then I recognized your step.”



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“Probably you heard some of the policemen,” Charlotte replied. “I was just straightening up the room. They track in so much dirt that I hardly get a chance to rest.”

“But why do the police keep coming here, and at night?”

“It’s the law, dear. They have to do it until—it will be all over after we lay Ninette away.”

“I’ll be glad. They wake me up. You don’t know how dreadful it is—hearing sounds all the time in that room—now.”

Jayne put up her arms and kissed her old nurse affectionately. Charlotte relocked the door, and returned to the *escritoire*.

“This drawer is left open at last,” she said in an audible whisper. “I felt sure I’d find it so finally, with all this coming and going. Poor Jayne! They’ll never stop coming here, even after the funeral. *I* know.”

She was rummaging hurriedly in the drawer now, and showed more and more anxiety as she tossed its contents about.

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“It's gone!”

Frantically she tugged at the other drawers, cast an agonized glance about the room until Lepadou began to fear that she would end by discovering his retreat, and slipped away as she had come, her hands clutched together in a gesture of acute distress and disappointment.

The detective returned to his seat before the *escritoire*. There was no doubt in his mind as to what the maid had come for. It was the scrap-book. And he had chanced to keep it in his hand.

Reading the clipping once again, he tried to reconstruct the incident in even greater detail than he had already done. If the young woman at St. Cloud had really been Ninette—and there was little reason to question it now—and if she had gone there to meet someone, as Fergeron had suggested, why had she missed the last boat up towards Paris? The lover having failed to arrive on the last boat down, there would be no hope of seeing him that night, for the up boat made the later trip, and she would be left

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with plenty of time to save herself from the worst of her predicament. Or had she expected him to come by automobile? Very unlikely. In that case it would have been more natural to wait for him and his machine in some resort nearer the city, so that they might ride out together.

“There’s some mystery here,” he grumbled, “but I can’t lay my hand on it.”

For several minutes he sat there, his elbows on the marble slab of the piece of furniture before him, his head in his hands, pondering the question—then suddenly he felt a disagreeable crisping of the skin. It was that old sensation of being threatened by an unknown danger. He looked up, and in a mirror of the wall he saw that the door was ajar.

After a time it opened slowly, but only Forgeron entered.

“Boussai has come,” he announced in a whisper.

“The *commissaire* — at this time of night?”

“That’s nothing unusual. He does work

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on a case, I'll say that for him. And he likes to make sure that none of us are napping. Do you want him to find you here?"

"No; is there any way for me to get out?"

The other nodded, went to the window and silently unlocked the blind.

"You can climb down and be out of sight before he comes in here if you hurry."

Lepadou hurried, and was soon around the corner, where he changed his rapid stride to a loitering walk. He reached home unchallenged, pursued only by the thought:

"It was just as if another shot was about to be fired. I didn't see any Boussai, either. I've only Forgeron's word for it that he arrived at all. And Forgeron was somewhere behind me both times. This time, maybe, if it hadn't been for the mirror——"

The detective threw off his coat impatiently and prepared for bed. This was too much. He was actually suspecting the one man whose blundering honesty had awakened a feeling of friendship. And yet—facts were facts.



## CHAPTER VIII

### DISCOVERIES

JAYNE frequently found herself breakfasting with Pierre Noyeau in the family dining-room—for since her sister's death she had conceived a horror of taking her chocolate in bed. One morning he suddenly remarked:

“Do you ever look in the glass?”

The girl flushed. She knew what he meant. She was growing more beautiful every day.

“I can't help it,” she exclaimed. “It's just excitement. There are always people in the house now who keep me awake. That makes me feverish. And you think it's because I'm not sorry about Ninette.”

“Of course you're sorry,” returned Pierre, reaching out and covering her hand gently with his own. “A flower is not to

## DISCOVERIES

blame for opening in the sunshine. I know what is happening.”

Know? How could he? It was a secret which she had breathed to no one. Was love, then, something which could not be hidden? But perhaps Pierre had better eyes than others. Maybe he was in love, himself. He might have had some secret attachment all along. Poor Ninette! It was cruel if nobody regretted her.

“At least, I think I know,” Noyeau went on a shade less confidently. “The fact is, I’m judging you by myself. I hope it doesn’t make you angry?”

It came to Jayne that she had been seeing a great deal of Pierre of late. The rest of the family seldom came to meals any more, and the two were thus thrown much into each other’s society. The realization brought a moment’s uneasiness. Was his solicitude becoming too marked?

She brushed the idea aside. No doubt he was longing for someone to whom he could pour out confidences, just as she was. If he had a sweetheart—an unguessed sweet-

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heart—whom he was now free to marry, he must want to talk about her. And of course he was ashamed of his treachery to the dead. But Jayne could forgive him. She was ashamed of her own.

“I don’t see why I should be angry,” she said after a little. “I believe I understand what you mean. Perhaps it is the same with me. Do you think it is very wicked of us?”

Pierre’s face lighted up.

“No, no. It’s not wicked. But it may be too soon to talk—in here at least. One can hardly breathe with the police always around. Why can’t we take a walk—over to *l’arène*, for example?”

At the mention of *l’arène* Jayne blushed, for that lonely ruin, which so few in Paris ever visit, was the very place sacred to her meetings with the fairy prince. But she couldn’t confess this—not before Pierre had spoken openly of *his* secret attachment. And to object to the arena might look odd. Besides, she had no engagement there to-day.

So it happened that soon after luncheon the two started down the rue Monge and

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turned off into that network of unfamed streets which twist about the old amphitheater without ever actually exposing it to view. Pierre knew the way without asking—a circumstance which shocked her a little. She had half-fancied that she and the prince were alone in its secret.

They came to a little hill, looking much like a neglected graveyard, entered through the rusty iron gate which guards the entrance, mounted a flight of steps and emerged upon a small, grassy plateau. Beneath their feet lay an immense bowl, its farther side broken by a group of unpicturesque factories, but its nearer half sweeping down in a great semicircle of steps to the level space once reserved for gladiators and wild beasts.

The spell of *l'arène* is so potent that for a time even these young Parisians were drawn from their own affairs. Pierre began to explain the details of the mighty ruin, the half of which still lies buried under the débris of the Middle Ages. Jayne was wondering whether she dared to tell him her story before he told his, when she discovered that



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they were not alone. Far off to one side there was a man sitting with his back to them on one of the lowest tiers. He turned at the sound of Noyeau's voice, lifted to attract the girl's wandering attention, and she saw that the incredible thing had happened—though it was one which might easily have been foreseen. The fairy prince had come there to day-dream, and they had surprised him in the act.

He rose and moved towards them at once, as if seized with the mad notion of making himself known. But his face was gloomy and threatening. Jayne understood in a flash of consternation what was passing in his mind. He did not know that the man posed so intimately by her side was as good as her brother. For the first time in her life she was face to face with jealousy.

Pierre saw her distress, and made matters worse by putting his arm around her.

“There's nothing to be afraid of,” he whispered. “It's only some impudent masher. I'll soon settle with him if he gives me the chance.”

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Benson came on, apparently bent on speaking. But he passed with only a stare.

“Now that is more than I can stand. He meant it for impertinence.”

Noyeau growled the words out angrily, advanced, and continued with ironic politeness:

“*Pardon, m’sieu.* But did you mistake us for somebody you knew? I thought, from the way you looked——”

Benson, feeling a touch on his arm, wheeled around, glanced indifferently at Pierre and then beyond him to Jayne.

This was her opportunity. She snatched a pencil from her *sac*, and, making certain that her lover observed her, wrote a few words hurriedly on the smooth stone slab of the seat. In the midst of her occupation she caught disconnected snatches of sentences exchanged in unfriendly tones.

“Know you, m’sieu?”

“Yes; somehow I didn’t take a fancy to your stare. I thought——”

“Absent-mindedness on my part. Deso-

## THE BONCOEUR AFFAIR

lated to have annoyed mad'moiselle. Nothing intended."

The fairy prince, having expressed himself in these outwardly conciliatory terms, went on, leaving Noyeau to return to Jayne in triumph.

"That's the way to handle those fellows," he exclaimed, resuming his place. "Show a bold front, and they hunt for cover every time. If I'd let him pass he'd have followed us home, found out where you live, and—there's no telling what he wouldn't have dared."

Jayne scarcely heard, and the rest of the afternoon passed with intolerable slowness. She had forgotten the idea of mutual confidences, her mind being on what she had written—now carefully covered by a fold of her skirt:

*"Don't make a foolish mistake. Meet me here to-night."*

Pierre complained that the encounter with "that infernal *bonnet de fou*" had upset her beyond all reason. He showed her the tiny caves which once served as cages

## DISCOVERIES

for the lions; but this invocation of the dim past only added to her depression. So finally he took her home.

A few hours later and night had converted the arena into such a pool of darkness that Jayne, having safely escaped from home, stumbled as she made for the spot where she expected to find her lover waiting. But so little timid was she now that she hardly started when an arm was thrust abruptly beneath her own.

“I heard you coming,” whispered Benson, “and I couldn’t wait.”

“It’s all right,” said Jayne. “I’d know you if I was blind.”

Indeed, everything was so perfectly satisfactory that the two groped their way to a seat and let a quarter of an hour go by before they even seemed to remember the quarrel which had brought them there.

“It was Pierre I was with this afternoon,” Jayne finally observed. “He insisted on coming here—and he’s only my brother.”



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Benson expressed contrition; then grew thoughtful.

“I understand it now, Jayne. But, after all, he isn’t even a possible brother any more. Who knows? He may be planning to marry you.”

“Foolish one! But from things he has said I fancy he has a sweetheart, and isn’t as sorry about Ninette as he ought to be.”

“No one would be as sorry as he ought to be—if he thought he was going to get you in her place.”

“But I’m not the sweetheart.”

“How do you know? Though I suppose he must at one time have preferred your sister or he wouldn’t have engaged himself.”

“It might have been the *usines*,” admitted Jayne, with that tolerance of the idea of commercialism in marriage to which French women are brought up. “I suppose Ninette would have inherited papa’s business.”

“I suppose so. And now you’ll inherit it. That’s probably the way he looks at it.”

Jayne nestled her head in the hollow of her lover’s shoulder.

## DISCOVERIES

“I’m so glad, dear, that you loved me before you knew Ninette was going to die.”

“Before I—before she died, you mean. But it wouldn’t make any difference. No man could look at you and remember whether you had money or not.”

“Then he must have felt that way about *her*. She was ever so much prettier than I. And that does away with his other sweetheart.”

“And brings us back to you,” asserted Benson. “I don’t like it—his being with you. And I’m sorry I ran into him this afternoon. He has seen me now. We’ll have to be more careful than ever.”

“There’s another thing, too,” murmured the girl.

“What?”

“Oh, Prince! Can’t you see? I love you. To be with you here alone—we mustn’t!”

She buried her head yet deeper in his coat, while his arms went around her in a sudden, passionate embrace.

“We must run away and get married,” he said thickly, after a silence interrupted only

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by kisses. "There'd be no end of delays now before we could do it in the regular way. Will you trust me and let me take you from Paris—at once?"

"Not to-night?"

"Why not?"

She shook her head. His vehemence frightened her, for an elopement would be an open challenge to her mother. True, her mother would not know of it till after she was gone, but Jayne had no faith in mere distance to bring her to terms. Madame Boncoeur's indomitable will, the rigid régime of seclusion which she had until now succeeded in enforcing, still had their influence. Some crisis was needed to break that hold. Jayne merely shivered—in invisible bonds.

Benson, misunderstanding her reluctance, accused her of coldness, of a lack of faith in his intentions. How could he say such things when she had to fight so to keep her will from crumbling before his own?

Home, after all, was a refuge, and she was glad when they reached the quai. Climbing

## DISCOVERIES

in at the window was such an old affair now that it hardly served to distract her thoughts. She was all but careless in her readjustment of the staple in the padlock, and turned on the light with an energy, which was purely mechanical. Then she uttered a cry of consternation. Before her, stiffly upright in her invalid's chair, sat her mother.

“So, this is the way you employ your time?”

Madame Boncoeur's voice was cold—like a poignard. Jayne backed away and sank down, nearly helpless, upon the bed.

“I—I haven't been doing anything wrong,” she stammered.

“Not wrong? Running about the streets like a *grisette*, and your sister hardly in her grave?”

“No,” cried Jayne. “You've kept me here as if I was a prisoner, almost, and I couldn't bear it. What has Ninette to do with it? Staying in wouldn't do her any good. And I guess I cared for Ninette more than you ever did.”



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Her mother's use of an evil but dimly comprehended word had roused unsuspected depths in the girl's nature. She spoke at random. But the effect of her last remark was that of a thunderbolt. Madame Boncoeur went as white as paper and fell back trembling in her chair.

"Who could have told you that?" she gasped. "I gave her everything. You're like your father. You want to kill me."

Jayne, who had jumped up, astonished at what she had done, remained speechless so long that her mother was able to recover some vestiges of her authority.

"Tell me where you have been and what you have been doing," she repeated. "See! You've brought on one of my bad spells. Will you answer, or not?"

"I found that the shutters came open, and I went out—hoping that I might meet Pierre coming home."

The falsehood was out before she had time to consider its consequences. Madame Boncoeur visibly relaxed.

"It was frightfully indiscreet," she re-

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turned, “though perhaps it *has* been too much like a prison here. But Pierre! Did you see him?”

“No.”

“But you like him very much, do you not?”

The old woman actually smiled as she went on, relapsing into familiar discourse:

“I might as well tell thee. We have decided that, as soon as the mourning is over, thou shalt be married. Don’t interrupt. No use denying now that thy inclinations run the same way as ours—which is fortunate for us all. Pierre is very fond of thee, and will make an excellent husband. But of all things, don’t try to meet him clandestinely, again. It might give him a bad opinion.”

“But—he’s my brother. In a little while he’d have married Ninette, and——”

“No need for self-reproaches, my dear child. If she had lived—yes. But there are business reasons why he should marry into the family—though this is not the proper time to discuss such things.

“And now—come and kiss me, and open

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the door. No, no! I can wheel myself, and Charlotte is waiting to help me to bed.”

Jayne obeyed as unquestioningly as a child. In a moment her mother seemed to have regained her old-time ascendancy. But the crisis necessary to break the bonds had nevertheless arrived, and the instant she was alone the daughter sat down and wrote to Benson:

*“I’ve had a scene with maman. She caught me coming in, and I had to pretend that I’d been out looking for Pierre. It’s as you said—they’re preparing to marry me to him, and I can never make them believe I’m not anxious for it now. Something I said about Ninette certainly frightened my mother. But I don’t know why, and I can’t fight her openly. She’s too strong.*

*“I’ll be at the arena the first night I can get away. There may be some difficulty, as she has found out about the staple. But I’ll manage it somehow. You must be there, whenever it is, and take me away. If I stayed they’d end by making me do whatever*

## DISCOVERIES

*they want. I'm afraid now. Maman uses us all—papa, Pierre and everybody—as if we were wax in her hands. I almost believe she could kill anyone who stood out against her. And with Ninette hardly cold!”*

She signed and sealed the note, cautiously opened the shutter, and looked out. If there were only some way of sending her message at once, before the undermining processes should even begin. And at that moment, as if in answer to prayer, there appeared a solitary gamin marching along the other side of the street. She called softly. He stopped; then hurried towards her.



## CHAPTER IX

### CHEZ LE JUGE

**L** E SQUELETTE had been having a weary time for some days now. He had devoted himself at first to the rediscovery of the old woman with a shawl, for he still firmly believed that it was she who had stolen the suspected marrons. Failing in his efforts, he made a half-hearted attempt to get in touch with Lepadou with a view to making a clean breast of everything. But a couple of calls at the detective's lodgings having failed to produce results, he put off the evil day by adopting the policy of merely drifting around and hoping for luck.

The sight of Jayne at her window and the sound of her voice startled him. He had been loitering too much in that vicinity, perhaps, and was going to be compelled to give an account of himself. As he approached

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her, however, he was suddenly impressed by a pitying sense of her utter helplessness to do anybody any harm.

“Boy, will you run an errand for me?” she asked.

“Errand, lady? W’y not?”

She *was* helpless, and foolishly trusting—qualities which Le Squelette ordinarily thoroughly despised.

“It’s only a letter,” she went on. “I want it delivered right away and an answer brought back.”

“Lemme have it, then.”

The white square dropped into his hand. He was certainly in luck, for here beyond a doubt was the name and address of the man with whom she had talked by the river.

Jayne held out a bill.

“I’ve only five francs. Will that be enough?”

This was going too far—offering to pay him in advance. Le Squelette drew back.

“Aw, keep yer money, Miss. I kin git all I want from de gent.”

With that he walked off, a look of

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almost ferocious self-importance on his face. Hadn't he just refused five francs?

"Golly! Just like a *dook*."

Even so, there wasn't much fun in betraying such confidence as Jayne's. His sense of triumph threatened to ooze away. What if he were to continue the duke's part, though, and deliver the letter honestly?

For several blocks he walked along, considering the pleasant novelty of such a line of action. But there had been too much playing at ducks and drakes with duty already. Besides, the flap of the envelope was still moist. He opened it without any difficulty whatever, and after considerable mental labor, aided by the light of a street-lamp, was master of its contents. An elopement. The man who had bought the marrons had brought her as far as this!

"Now s'posin' I *had* delivered it to him!" he exclaimed, appalled by a sudden comprehension of the dangers to virtue. "De girl cert'nly needs a gardeen."

No less certainly, fate appeared to have appointed him to supply the need. He had

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only to put the letter in his pocket and let it stay there. But why stop with this? Why not take it to its destination, and get Benson's answer? Lepadou, he knew, always gave villains plenty of rope and never interfered with their plots till the last possible moment.

The flap was soon resealed, and though it looked rather the worse for wear, nobody would expect a letter to arrive spick and span from the hands of a street urchin.

Benson, it proved, lived in a small hotel, where the boy boldly demanded audience through the clerk. There was no need of secrecy here. Nor was there any trouble. Benson, advised by the house telephone, ordered the messenger sent up, and Le Squelette was soon in his room—with leisure to repent of his rashness. The fellow looked formidable even in a dressing-gown when seen thus close at hand.

But he paid no attention to anything but the letter, which he read almost at a glance. Then seizing a pencil, he leaned over a writing-table, and on a blank space below



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Jayne's signature scrawled a single word:  
“*Bon.*”

The boy had barely presence of mind to read it over his shoulder as he stooped. “Bon” meant “all right.” The elopement was on. And Benson's face when he turned showed such a degree of exultant triumph that it was evident that no small obstacle would now be sufficient to stop him.

“Here's twenty francs,” he said, having resealed the envelope securely with wax. “Just you make a beeline back to where you were sent from.”

“Beeline nothin'—meh fine buck,” muttered Le Squelette to himself as he took the money.

And yet, why not? More than likely Jayne would go to the rendezvous whether she received an answer or otherwise. So he stuck the letter in the split end of a stick and passed it to her without unnecessary delay. Her exclamation of pleasure was his reward.

But immediately afterwards distressful feelings returned to take possession of him. The only thing he could think of sufficient

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now to rob the villain of his prey was a riot of the juvenile proletariat, organized so as to be ready to break out at the arena whenever the critical moment should arrive. With a tenth part of twenty francs he could depend upon producing such a demonstration as would frighten away the devil himself. It looked good. And yet—the idea that Jayne, herself, might be there to witness this carnival of disorder was distinctly unpleasant. She would be frightened; she even might be hurt.

“Gee! I b’lieve I’ve fallen for dat skirt,” he mused as he wandered homewards.

It was ridiculous, and quite unworthy of a man of talent. Nevertheless it was true, and strangely consoling in spite of the difficulties which it brought in its train. He would have to think of some other plan of saving her, or even make a determined effort to find the boss.

At that very moment Lepadou was so near to his young lieutenant that a single different turning might have brought them together. The detective, in fact, was but on

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the other bank of the Seine, chasing an *ignis fatuus* of his own.

For days he had been following it—"on a mere hunch," he would have said. But he couldn't shake off the impression of the constant nearness of the object of his search. The impossible Marle, the supposititious Le Caillou, the yet more unlikely Squid—call him what one liked, he never seemed far away. Time after time, in a face seen in a crowd, in a figure flitting along some lonely by-street, he thought he caught sight of a telltale trait or feature. And always it would disappear on closer scrutiny, or the suspect—on those rare occasions when it was possible to identify him—prove to be a demonstrably innocent citizen.

On this occasion the quarry was apparently an old woman. But Lepadou cared little for appearances. He sensed some connection with the "case," and worked with the skill and persistence of a dog. Nevertheless, on reaching a crowded thoroughfare, the woman disappeared—melted somehow into the masculine. It was if a disguise



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had been removed, piece by piece, in those intervals when intervening pedestrians obstructed the view.

In the morning, deciding that he was becoming the victim of a mere obsession, the detective resolved to busy himself for a while exclusively with the Boncoeur affair. He had not forgotten the shot which had been fired at him through the darkness with Forgeron at his back, nor the fact that Forgeron did not appear to enjoy the full confidence of his superior. His ignorance, of course, might be assumed. Or it might be that Boussai had kept from his inspector any number of things worth knowing—things which would appear only in the *procès-verbal* of the preliminary *enquête*. And that would be in the hands of the *juge d'instruction* assigned to the case.

To get a look at it was no easy matter, for Paul Tardieu—the judge in question—was a comparative stranger, while the Chief of Police, who might have acted as friendly intermediary, was out of town. Lepadou was just leaving his lodgings and wondering



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what steps it would be best to take, when who should appear but a boy wearing a conspicuously new cap, a clean collar, and a necktie taken straight from the rainbow, the rest of his person remaining modestly neglected. A second glance was needed to identify the approaching vision as Le Squelette.

“Some girl is responsible for this,” declared the detective, coming to a halt and pointing an accusing finger. “You’ve caught the oldest disease in the world—and just when I wanted to use you.”

“Who, *me*? Stop yer kiddin’, boss. Dis is a sort of disguise. I thought it’d be better to dress up a bit if I come round yer neighborhood in de day time. Makes me less conspic’ous.”

“Less conspicuous? You’re likely to cause a panic. But if you’re still in your senses, get busy and see what you can find out about Tardieu—what his habits are when off duty. Here’s some money. I’ll go back home and wait for your report.”

“*Judge* Tardieu?” responded the gamin,

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pocketing the bill. "I know about him already—heard de concierge talkin'. He's crazy—dat's w'at."

"The concierge?"

"De judge. He spends all his time at de picture shows."

"A movie fiend."

"Naw—w'at'd there be so crazy 'bout dat? He goes to the ex'hibitions—de futilists."

"The futurists?"

"Dat's de idea—de guys w'at make pictures like a crazy-quilt. It must be de judge who keeps 'em from bein' arrested for it."

Lepadou grinned in agreement and started away. The boy ran to stop him.

"But I've got some things to tell yeh," he protested. "Dere's been de devil doin' w'ile yeh been away."

And he related in detail the plans of Jayne and Benson, and the means he had been relying on to bring them to naught.

"I'll wait for you every night at Les Deux Chiens," said the detective when the narrative was concluded. "The minute you see

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Jayne leave home, you come and tell me. Is there anything else?"

"Yeh might say so," declared the boy, searching his pockets and finally bringing out the program which he had found sticking to the stolen marrons.

"Where'd you get this?" demanded Lepadou, taking the paper.

"W'y, de other night I found de shutter of Miss Jayne's windeh was fixed so as to come open even w'en it was locked. So I clumb in. De paper was hid in a crack of de floor along de wall of Miss Ninette's room."

He had fully intended to confess to the truth, but at the critical moment his imagination once more got the better of him. The approving hand of the boss falling on his shoulder like an accolade made him wince with a sense of guilt. But he was reassured by a repetition of his instructions for shadowing Jayne. The elopement, at least, seemed thoroughly provided against.

There was a well-advertised opening of an exhibition of modern art in a building near

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the Tuileries that morning, and Lepadou at once turned his steps in its direction. If Tardieu were a connoisseur, that was certainly the place to look for him. *En route* the detective made a few alterations in his appearance, so that when he arrived a certain look of seediness had given place to something more spick and span, calculated to make him pass as a connoisseur himself.

The turn-out of the public was scanty—such a crowd as the critics would be sure to describe as “*un peu de monde*” in their articles the next morning. But Tardieu was there, seated in front of a particularly atrocious painting—entitled, “The Dauntless Nude Goes Out to Sea,” but revealing nothing apparently but a handful of pink autumn leaves afloat in a ditch of dirty green water.

Lepadou sat down, consulted his catalogue, and discovered that a disciple of Cezanne was responsible for the marvel.

“Wonderful!” he exclaimed aloud, as if unable to contain his admiration.

The judge regarded him out of the corner



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of his eye, then remarked in a drawling voice:

“You don’t *look* like a fool.”

“A fool, m’sieu?”

“Of course, unless you come here for amusement, same as I do.”

Then in another tone:

“Ah, I see. It’s a disguise. Give me your real name, and try to act so that everybody in the room won’t know you’re a detective.”

Somewhat crestfallen, Lepadou complied with the order, and explained that he had had no time to attend to his appearance.

“Lepadou!” repeated the judge. “But I didn’t recognize you, so the disguise was all right after all. What is it you’re looking for?”

“A man who can believe a strange story.”

“Sounds refreshing. Nobody with sense ever believes any other kind. Go ahead.”

In a low tone the detective described his disturbing encounter with the publicity which follows every move of the official police, and of the ruse by which he had finally avoided it.

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“And now,” he concluded, “the Chief is away, and I want to see Boussai’s *procès-verbal* in the Boncoeur affair.”

“Want to save your cake and eat it, too, eh? All right. I’ve got it in my pocket.”

“You believe all that I’ve been telling you?”

“Why not? It’s too absurd to be a lie. And this Caillou, or Marle, that you mention—I’ve interested myself somewhat in his career, and feel sure that no man capable of catching him would think of doing so without adopting some extraordinary means.”

He took a bundle of papers from his pocket, and Lepadou, pouncing eagerly upon it, was soon master of the report. There was little news, but everything was minutely detailed and carefully *en règle*.

“This Boussai seems to be a competent man,” he offered.

“A model,” replied Tardieu with a yawn. “Been in the service so long that I supposed he’d wormed all human traits out of him. And yet he surprised me the other day by

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asking me to help him keep the one particularly painful feature of the case out of the newspapers in deference to the feelings of the family."

"That's what I call decent."

"Oh, Boussai is a gentleman. And if he isn't exactly clever, his industry and honesty fill me with a painful sense of my own shortcomings. *He'd* never go to an exhibition with a *dossier* in his pocket."

"That reminds me, *m'sieu le juge*, I've something to show you."

Lepadou took out the program which he had just received from Le Squelette, and explained how it happened to fall into his hands.

"L'Alouette!" breathed Tardieu, bending over the faded paper. "*Mon Dieu!* But it's good to see that name again."

"You didn't know her?"

"*Didn't* I? While she was climbing from the *boites* of Montmartre to the *Opéra*, I was right here in Paris, climbing to my first appointment. And you ask me if I knew L'Alouette, the Skylark! Why, like all

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other right-minded persons of my sex and age, I adored her. She could dance. She could act. She could sing. She was so beautiful that—but what is the use of trying to make anyone understand what she was?”

“This program may be a valuable clew, then.”

“Clew? Oh, yes. Of course. You can think of business when you’re looking at a piece of paper which brings Nina Amelle—that was her real name—back to life. You ought to have been a judge. But I—since you’re really not one of us, but a foreigner and born in America as I take it—I’m going to make a confession. When I was young I haunted the theaters just as I haunt the exhibitions now. But it was not to scoff. And even to-day—but it was so long ago there’s no use in recalling it. This program must have come from somebody much older than either of the Boncoeur girls.”

“Do you know what became of her—the Skylark, I mean?”

“No, Lepadou, I don’t. She left the stage in the midst of her glory. I don’t even know



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what became of her child, though it was said that she had one. Let me see. There was talk of a count. *Le Comte de Montfayat*, that's who it was, from the provinces somewhere. I've heard say he married her, but I'm not certain. I'd taken to harness seriously by that time and was stuffing my mind with law. Now I've got to go. I've an *instruction* to conduct."

Lepadou hated to part with this strange judge, so full of levity, so thoroughly French. But it was necessary to thank him and to give him back his papers.

As he did so, his eye caught sight of the *greffier's* snapshot of Ninette's chamber. But having already seen the inventory, he failed to give the picture more than cursory attention. Had he examined it thoroughly, then and there—that simple work of mechanical art, so much more significant in its reality than any of the products of fantastic brushes on the walls about him—what changes might not have been made in the lives of men? Impossible to say. For there is no speculation quite so futile as that of

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trying to determine what might have happened if that which did not happen had achieved the impossible miracle of coming to pass.

## CHAPTER X

### A BLOTCH OF INK

**D**ECLINING a seat in the judge's carriage, Lepadou started at a brisk pace up the Champs Elysées—that boulevard of boulevards, where Paris, which is becoming drab and modern in so many quarters, still displays the elegance and magnificence of other days. Beyond the Arc de Triomphe his walk reduced itself to a saunter, and once beneath the trees of the beautiful Bois he succumbed completely to idleness. The long, winding avenues were almost deserted. It was not yet their season. But the sunlight, sufficiently warm for the comfort of an outdoor man, peopled the solitude with graceful shadows; and myriads of buds, just swelling into green, prophesied on every hand of the summer which was coming. The world of crime seemed to have been left far behind. Yet

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even here—and on one of these very benches—a man had been murdered not more than a week before.

The detective shrugged his shoulders at the recollection, and gave himself up to revery. Two lines of investigation lay now before him. There was Jayne's rendezvous with Benson, and there was the ancient theater program. It would be necessary, of course, to try to trace L'Alouette's connection with the case. But it was his habit at times to let his brain lie fallow. Only mediocre talents keep themselves continually fagged out with work. And there was no hurry. Until nightfall, when he meant to take a hand in anything which might happen at *l'arène*, sheer loafing promised to be the most profitable—and certainly the most agreeable—way of passing the time.

He was the more annoyed when a flashily dressed woman, who had already passed him twice, came and seated herself resolutely on the bench beside him.

“I followed you, m'sieu,” she began abruptly.



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“*Hein?*”

“Yes, clear from the Tuileries where you said good-bye to *m’sieu, le juge*. Please don’t begin a refusal. I’m asking nothing of you—at least nothing of the sort you imagine.”

“Perhaps madame will enlighten me, then?”

Lepadou eyed his companion curiously, seeing in her an undoubted *intrigante*, yet one obviously moved by something outside of her usual rôle.

“That’s right,” she said, with a nod of intelligence. “Artful I may be. But I’m not thinking of employing my arts on *m’sieu* Lepadou.”

The detective frowned.

“How did you come by my name? I don’t recollect the judge having used it after we left the exhibition building.”

“Nevertheless, I learned it. And you’re working on the Boncoeur case. That, *m’sieu*,”—and here her voice trembled with sudden passion, “is something I’m personally interested in. Don’t let’s mince mat-

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ters. I know about policemen and detectives. Naturally you don't exert yourselves without being paid for it. So tell me what I must give to have you get at the truth without fear or favor to anybody, and then come and report it to me instead of to the authorities?"

"Under those circumstances," Lepadou laughed in spite of himself, "I wouldn't take the earth as a gift."

"Tut, tut! Let's come to an understanding. I've got the money with me."

She opened a silver mesh-bag and took out a handful of hundred-franc notes. The detective saw that, however distasteful it might be, he would have to play the game.

"Who is it you want protected?" he asked in an undecided tone.

"That's better," said the woman, thrusting the notes into his hand. "But I can't answer you."

"And I can't work in the dark. Perhaps it isn't protection that you want to give. You may be looking for revenge. That's quite another matter."

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“Believe me, m’sieu, if that was it I’d be inclined to do the job myself.”

“*Le chantage*, then?”

“No, no!”

Giving way to an outburst of emotion, she caught his arm.

“No, no. Blackmail? Never. Can’t you think of me as a human being—a woman who still has something to live for and means to keep it?”

Lepadou pocketed the money, and took down an address through which they were to communicate. Shortly before dark he was again at Les Deux Chiens, ready to resume his rôle of dipsomaniac—for once with no regret for the necessity of ordering an *absinthe au sucre*. There had been something peculiarly distasteful in the flashily dressed woman’s silly belief in the universality of corruption. He didn’t want to study her case just yet, and to get it out of his mind he began to re-examine L’Alouette’s program.

After all, a time-stained paper, sole relic, probably, of a long-forgotten triumph, has a

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fascination, and the breath of the theater is clean compared with much of life. He was engaged in noting the other names in the cast when he became aware that somebody had slipped into the corner beside him. Slowly he turned and regarded the intruder through a pair of eyes which seemed suddenly to have become filmed over with a look of semi-intoxication. If it wasn't another woman! But an old woman this time—a perfect gypsy of a woman, with her head wrapped in a shawl.

For an instant he thought there was something familiar about the figure. It brought back his last chase of a fancied incarnation of The Squid. On closer inspection he became convinced that the two were not the same. But it was curious that there should have been even a momentary resemblance. Could anybody have been impersonating this old hag? The idea was ridiculous.

“Either Paris is haunted,” he said to himself, “or else I am losing my mind.”

He had returned to his contemplation of



## THE BONCOEUR AFFAIR

the program when a voice began to mutter softly in his ear:

“*L’Alouette! Ah, la chérie! Il est possible, alors, qu’elle n’est pas oublié?*”

“Forgotten?” repeated the detective, hiding his surprise at the words of the old woman, who had moved so as to look over his shoulder. “Why shouldn’t she be forgotten? In Paris the world moves. You don’t pretend to remember her?”

“Why not, young man? Do you think I was always a hag? I was *figurante*, let me tell you, at the Opéra. And by the same token you might be buying something to warm my old bones. What is *L’Alouette* to you?”

“I collect old programs, that’s all,” said Lepadou, beckoning to the *garçon*. “That is, I did before——”

“Don’t I know, dearie? Before the good drink collected you. And now you hope to sell your last little curiosity for another glass or two as soon as your credit here is gone. I’ll take *du vin rouge*, if you please. Bless me! Don’t I remember when I came

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to the end of *my* rope? It was in no such hole as this. But it amounted to the same thing, with nothing but *m'sieu le comte's* last diamond to stand between me and starvation. Afterwards—but it wasn't life, that."

"What count do you mean?" asked Lepadou, with carefully assumed indifference.

"Montfayat was the great patron of the opera in those days. Why couldn't it have been him?"

There was something so unconscious in the effrontery of the bedlam that it held the detective's attention even more than did the surprising purity of her French. At the mention of the Count de Montfayat he had felt his pulse quicken, for the same name had been let fall by the judge. Yet he felt that his companion was watching him, and he gave all his outward attention to his glass.

"Oh, the *belle figurante* that I was! Even Le Glaçon sometimes applauded me when I came off stage—and it takes something to warm up a wardrobe-woman, and she

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the star's. For of course L'Alouette was the queen of us all. She had a voice. This is good wine. I thank you, young man. May you have better luck—and I hope you'll pay for it in cash. I like to see the money going from hand to hand, if it's only the last sou."

The crone sipped her wine with a certain elegance as she talked—an elegance tattered like her shawl, but of good original material—while Lepadou remained steeped in apparent oblivion. It was several seconds before he could recall where he had heard the name Le Glaçon before; then he remembered that it had been muttered by Boncoeur in the room of the murdered girl. Le Glaçon, then, had been wardrobe-woman to L'Alouette—unless his present companion, whose object he more than suspected was merely to ascertain if his possession of the program had any significance, was inventing all her information. Some connection between the Boncoeur family and the Skylark was now beyond a doubt.

"What became of your old singing bird?" he brought out, as if suddenly recalling him-

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self to the subject. "Did she hit the slide, like you and me?"

"She? The Count married her."

"It can't be."

"Oh, didn't he?" The woman's voice, which had been remarkably mellow for one of her age, rose harshly in a gust of anger.

"Poor Alouette! Even her reputation is gone now. And that wretched old widower treated her badly, too. He couldn't get along even with his own son by his first. But my dear gave up everything for *him*."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. I have heard stories—but they are half-forgotten, and lies most likely, at that. I am old. I've heard, too, that L'Alouette is dead. Let us hope so."

The speaker, her passion spent, gave herself up to the luxury of the drink, and let drop nothing further save now and then a few maudlin syllables. She was soon asleep, and when finally she roused herself and hobbled off, Lepadou let her go without following her. He could verify the history of the Skylark at his leisure. As for the old



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woman, she was of no apparent consequence, and probably could be found again if wanted. Just at present he wished to keep himself free to deal with whatever should be reported of the movements of Jayne and Benson.

Le Squelette, with the same pair in mind, had spent the day in luxurious idleness. Being clothed beyond the recognition—or at least the toleration—of his usual companions, and overstocked with funds, he lunched and dined in sybaritic splendor, trying to imagine himself a youth of the extremely gilded sort. At first he played with the idea that he was in love, the victim of a hopeless and lugubrious passion, but his mind soon took him through all the vicissitudes of life, and he ended by feeling old, *blasé*, worn out by too much experience. Even staid Parisians stared at the strutting apparition as it passed along the fashionable promenades of their ever-astonishing city.

With the approach of night, he resumed his rags and his sense of reality, and immediately found himself attracting less atten-

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tion. In the St. Dennis quarter, where he wandered to pass the remaining time, rags and dirt were a sort of protective covering.

But even rags might have put on airs in one resort which he entered. It was a wretched *guingette*, or tea-garden, not so dirty as evil—a place where villainy was in the very reek of the sticky scum of its tables, and in the blight of the tubbed orange trees waiting for the season when they were to make a sylvan retreat of its backyard.

There were few customers at this hour, but one group at once riveted the lad's attention. They were seated in a sort of booth, half-hidden by imitation foliage—five men, four of them well-known characters, whom no student of slum life could have failed to recognize.

“La Haquenée, the Ambler; Le Tapageur, the Rollicker; Le Boquetin, the Ibex; Le Boucher, the Butcher,” he repeated softly. “Dere must be some deviltry in de wind wit’ them four settin’ wit’ heads together. Apaches, dat’s w’at. But I wonder who de guy is dey’s all listenin’ to? He don’t look

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like de rest. Looks more like—see his crooked legs an' arms!—looks more like a devil-fish."

A waiter came up.

"Gimme a cup of coffee," said Le Squelette, in the most impertinent voice at his command.

"Get along out of here and be quick about it," growled the waiter.

The boy found himself taken by the ear and rapidly conducted to the sidewalk.

There was no use in standing up for one's rights. The waiter was a Hercules. Also it was time to be moving on towards the quai. So Le Squelette saved the remains of his dignity by firing a volley of verbal abuse—from a safe distance—and hurried away.

It was soon dark, a fog having come up as the sun went down, covering the city with a gloomy mantle, like the presentiment of coming evil. But the boy welcomed it. With a fog, it was easy to flit from one hiding-place to another, to be found always walking quietly forward when a foot passenger came near, to run no risk of observation, yet

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always to keep the Boncoeur place in sight.

After a long wait, Jayne opened a blind (her supposed leaning towards Noyeau had saved her from interference), descended lightly to the sidewalk, and started in the direction of the rue Monge. Le Squelette darted towards Les Deux Chiens, his head down, his arms working like pistons, determined not to lose an instant in advising his patron that the night's drama had begun.

Thus he did not see an old *vendeuse*, who attempted to cross the street in front of him, until he had collided with her cart and sent a good half of her stock in trade rolling on the muddy pavement. The shock of the collision upset his faculties for an instant, but he would have gone on had not the old woman, who proved to be as strong as she was bent, seized him resolutely by the ear.

“*Mechant’ gosse!*” she screeched. “You’ve ruined me. But at least you’ll stop to pick up my fruit.”

“Ain’t got time,” he shot out—for he feared a quarrel and the possible interfer-



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ence of some patrol. "Here, I'll pay yeh. How much d'yeh——"

He stopped short. The apple woman was none other than the gypsy.

"Maybe you'd like it better if they was marrons," she chuckled, but without loosening her hold.

"So it *was* you that took 'em," he gasped, surprised at the frank admission of a fact which he had hoped to establish only by force and cunning. "I guess you an' me'll have to have a little talk—after a break like dat."

"Talk all you want to—only begin by pickin' up my fruit."

"But I got an errand. Lemme go, an' I'll come right back an' pay yeh an' pick up yer rotten apples besides."

"Pay me first."

"Den yeh wouldn't wait for me to git back," pronounced Le Squelette judicially. He was in a quandary. It seemed folly to drop the trail of the marrons, now that he had had the luck to pick it up again. At the same time the boss must be told about Jayne.

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An urchin of his own age, whom he had already encountered more than once, sauntered up out of the fog at this juncture and began to laugh. Le Squelette hesitated for just one instant, for orders were orders and he had been told to report to Lepadou in person. But it was too good a chance to be lost.

“Here, François,” he cried. “Run to Les Deux Chiens for me, will yeh?”

“What for?” asked the other, coming nearer.

“ ’Cause I can’t go myself till dis old witch gits her apples back in her cart. Yeh’ll find a seedy-lookin’ party fast asleep in one corner. You say to ’em, ‘*Le Squelette says she’s started*,’—just them words. He’ll give yeh five francs, *sans blague*.”

“An’ if he don’t?”

“If he don’t, I’ll give yeh leave teh take it out of my hide.”

This seemed to decide the messenger, for he disappeared at once, and in the right direction. Le Squelette followed him as far as he could with his eyes—which unfortu-

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nately was not far. Then he returned to the gypsy.

“Now, den, hand over de marrons.”

“You don’t suppose I’ve got ’em here? Why, I’ve eaten them.”

The boy doubled up with laughter.

“If you’d a et ’em—oh, ho-ho!”

“What’s the matter? Weren’t they made to eat?”

“Dey’s poisoned, d’at’s w’at. I was takin’ ’em to my boss to kill rats with.”

“Rats? Those candies cost ten francs a box.”

“He’s rich. He don’t care—an’ dey is very partic’lar rats up at our house.”

During this conversation the two had been retrieving the fruit, and now stood looking at each other for a moment in silence.

“You’re talking nonsense,” said the old woman. “I took those chestnuts just to show you there were others in Paris even smarter than you. And I meant to sell ’em.”

“Better sell ’em to me, den—I give yeh warnin’.”

“But if there’s something wrong about

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the business," she went on, "I don't want anything to do with it, or your money either. Come with me and I'll let you have the box."

"W'ere d' yeh live?"

"It ain't far, and you can help me push my cart."

Le Squelette felt that his position was undignified. Also the harridan's "not far" proved to be a weary distance, and in a direction which led to a dismal, ill-smelling section where at that hour not a soul seemed to be stirring. But she halted finally before a block of ancient warehouses, unlocked a door, and conducted him across a courtyard to a building half in ruins, in the cellar of which she lighted a stub of candle.

"It isn't a palace, dearie," she cackled. "But what you came for is right over there in the corner behind them empty barrels."

As he turned to look in the direction indicated, the candle was blown out.

"Here! W'at 'r' yeh doin'?" he cried, making a rush for the steps by which they had descended.

But his sense of direction was confused,



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and, tripping over a loose brick in the floor, he stumbled and fell. By the time he had picked himself up, a faint streak of illumination was coming in through what he discovered was a small window, ten or twelve feet from the ground. He had to stand back as far as the cramped space within the four walls would allow in order to get even a glimpse of what was beyond, and then all he saw was the gypsy, her relighted candle in her hand, her face pressed against the window-bars.

“Let me out, you old devil!” he screamed, beside himself with rage. “D’ yeh t’ink yeh can scare me?”

“Scare you? Why, you wouldn’t be frightened of a poor old body like me, would you? The candle blew out in the draft and I had to go and hunt for a match.”

“Well, den, come back so’s I can find de marrons.”

“They’re not there, boy.”

“Yeh said dey was. W’at’s de matter wid yeh? W’at ’re yeh goin’ to do?”

“I’m going to keep you here, keep you

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till you starve, keep you till you break your heart calling out and nobody answering.”

“She’s crazy!” gasped the boy with a shudder. “Come, old woman. I’ll give yeh all de money I got, and I know a way to get yeh plenty more.”

“Keep your money, little monkey-face that sets other boys to chasin’ women through the streets. You’ll need it for company, for we’re all alone with these nice, thick walls where nobody ever comes. I want to hear you moan and cry. But if you get hungry, let me know. I’ll be listening, and I’ll bring you something to eat—something good.”

“I don’t want to eat.”

“Not hungry, eh? But you will be. And then I’ll give you the *marrons*.”

“Them!” In spite of himself, the boy’s voice was beginning to shake. “They’s poisoned, I tell yeh.”

“Well, well, well. Perhaps they are. That’s what we’re going to find out. You’ll swallow every one of them or stay here till

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you starve—starve without a drop of water or a ray of light.”

And cackling over her horrible threat, the gypsy let something heavy fall over the window. Le Squelette rushed up the stairs and hurled himself against the door, which he already knew to be locked. It was useless to bruise his fists against the solid and unresponsive wood, but bruise them he did, with all the blind energy of an animal caught in a cage.

Meanwhile, Lepadou waited according to agreement in the café. No message arrived—for the boy, François, was not to be heard of again for many a day—and the hours passed in uneventful monotony. Eventually he had to move, but he took the precaution of walking past the Boncoeur house and on to the arena. Everything was quiet, and a growing light in the east sufficiently accounted for the absence of Le Squelette from any post of observation. Jayne could not be expected to elope after a certain hour. That the boy had gone home without reporting was nothing remarkable. Probably he be-



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lieved himself to have long outwatched his patron. Anyway it looked as if Jayne were safe for another eighteen hours or so.

Late as it was when he went to bed, the detective rose early, for he meant to spend a long day in the Hall of Public Records. The French file everything away. One may still read the actual words uttered by Abelard, Gille de Rais or Jeanne d'Arc. These vast archives are scattered all over the country. But as there is no discrimination used, and as no outsider has ever mastered the system of classification, the innumerable *dossiers* might as well be in ashes so far as the lay investigator is concerned.

Lepadou found himself in a dimly lighted interior, built like a theater, with galleries running clear to the roof. He liked research, knowing what stirring human dramas often lie in those volumes, those bundles of almost undecipherable manuscript apparently so meaningless and dull. He anticipated no difficulty—at least not in running down the history of Montfayat. A count, the *juge*



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*d'instruction* had called him. It ought to be easy to trace a count.

But the attendant who came forward to accept a liberal tip in lieu of other formalities quickly informed him of his error.

“We have only vital statistics here,” he said. “If your party was born, or married or deceased in Paris, we’ll have him. Otherwise you’d better look in the genealogies of the old nobility, and they’re in another building—closed just at present for repairs.”

Apparently the count had overlooked Paris at the statistical moments of his life, for no index bore his name.

Amelle, said to be the true patronymic of L’Alouette, yielded this entry:

“*Amelle, Nina; born Feb. 12, 1902, to Amelle, Nina.*”

An entry eloquent with omissions. There *had* been a child, then.

He turned to the B’s and found:

“*Boncoeur, Gustave Georges; born Oct. 7, 1864, to Gustave and Marie Boncoeur;*

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*married Oct. 9, 1900, to Jayne Roux, spinster."*

This was the chemical manufacturer beyond a doubt, and perfectly clear and regular. Not so the following birth-record:

*"Boncoeur, Jayne, born, to Gustave Georges Boncoeur, perfumer's apprentice, and to Jayne Roux Boncoeur, his wife, March 22, 1901."*

In the first place, it made Boncoeur a perfumer's apprentice as late as his thirty-seventh year, a full year after his marriage. What then could account for his subsequent and amazing rise in life? Not native ability, evidently. And what did the Boncoeur record mean by omitting all mention of another daughter? There was mention of a son, born two years later, and of his subsequent decease before reaching majority. But what about Ninette, the eldest child of all? Jayne Roux's own *dossier* said nothing about a natural child.

As Lepadou pored over the atrociously penned entries, he caught sight of an inky

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smudge on the margin of one of the documents. It was comparatively fresh.

“Six months old, or a year at most,” he mused. “So I’m not the first on the trail. That blot was never made by the recording clerk.”

And then to the attendant, who stood hovering near in hopes of an opportunity to earn another gratuity:

“I suppose the police have had this *dossier* out a good many times since the murder, haven’t they?”

“The Boncoeur *dossier*?” repeated the clerk, stooping to read. “*Mais non, m’sieu*. The police have their own secret records. They very seldom come to me.”

Lepadou, who knew this very well, followed with the question to which he really wanted an answer:

“Then, of course, you don’t remember who asked for these papers last?”

“It just happens that I do. It was a young man, a very brisk young man, and a little arrogant. He used a fountain pen—quite against the regulations, which require

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all copying to be done in pencil. You see the result, m'sieu—an ink-stain on one of the pages. We had words about it. That's how I happen to recall him."

"Very good."

Lepadou studied the mark through a pocket-lens. Here might be a valuable clue—after one had had time to puzzle out what it all meant.

But it was now the noon closing-hour, and the detective, having rewarded the attendant once more, took himself and his perplexities to a neighboring restaurant for lunch.



## CHAPTER XI

### DISAPPEARANCES FROM THE SCENE

**T**O Lepadou's mind, the case was now like one of those vague pictures made out of weather-stains upon well-seasoned timber. It was easy, by omitting a detail here and supplying another there, to see it as a complete and well-rounded composition. But as fanciful people in gazing at a weather-stain are able to modify its suggested outlines, turning what at one moment seems to be a human face into a landscape, the landscape into a group of figures and the group into a ship or a castle, so the investigator could take the facts which had thus far come to light and twist them into several different theories. But no theory accounted for all the facts, and the only effect of his discoveries, arrange them as he would, was to make the death of

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Ninette Boncoeur more mysterious than ever.

For instance, he had no sooner abandoned the chocolate cup as an important link in the chain of evidence, and come to the conclusion that the Boncoeur affair stood by itself with no connection whatever with the series of murders he had started out to investigate, than he had been shot at under circumstances so puzzling that it seemed almost necessary to invoke the spectre of Marle in order to explain them at all.

Then there was Forgeron, whom his mind persisted in regarding with friendly feelings, but against whom mere logic continued to warn him—Forgeron, with his position of trust and evident lack of the full confidence of his immediate superior. How link Forgeron—supposing that he was a link—with the woman of tawdry silks and laces encountered in the Bois? Or the woman in the Bois with the gypsy in *Les Deux Chiens*?

The women were a pretty puzzle in themselves. Did they have any connection with any persons in the drama, or were they

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merely spies? If the latter, whose spies? Echo answered.

Nor could it be said that the information just wrested from the records threw any light upon these matters. He might in time identify the author of the ink mark, but what then? Whether he proved to have been an open lover of Ninette, a secret follower, or merely a curious outsider running down some rumors he had heard, there was nothing in the combined evidence of all the documents taken together to furnish the slightest motive for his wishing the girl out of the way.

Whether Ninette was the daughter of L'Alouette, or of a wardrobe-woman, whether her father was the Count de Montfayat, or the chemical manufacturer, or somebody else, she was in any case the heir-ess to a considerable fortune. The records, if they altered her status at all, tended decidedly to enhance the value of her apparent prospects. The count was dead, and to have inherited from his widow would have been



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even better than to have inherited from Boncoeur.

“I’d better make sure, though, that the old song-bird is the count’s widow,” mused Lepadou as he finished his luncheon.

And finding himself passing the Odéon, and therefore near the Bibliothèque Nationale, he decided not to wait for the opening of the archives of the nobility—which might be a matter of weeks—but see what could be found in the files of the newspapers.

Being in possession of a ticket of entrance, he was soon seated before a rickety desk in a low stone building, more like a monastery than a library, where repose nearly all the literary treasures of the world and several hundred tons of its most unmitigated rubbish.

The file of “*Le Figaro*” for the year 1902—the year in which L’Alouette’s child was born—made no reference whatever to the distinguished *artiste*. But in the issue of April 2, 1903, he came upon an item headed, “*Mariage d’Une Chanteuse.*”

“*L’Alouette of the Opéra becomes Com-*



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*tesse de Montfayat,"* he continued to read, translating the salient sentences half aloud; "*Ceremony at Versailles—The Darling of opera-going Paris carries out her threat to make retirement from stage permanent—Bridegroom has estates near Avignon, where couple will reside.*"

The article went on in a laudatory but familiar vein, referring to the bride's beauty, talent and capricious spirit as to things well known to all. Her "*threat to make retirement from the stage permanent*" seemed to indicate that she had already abandoned her public career some time before. But there was no hint of any scandal—and this was already 1902. Evidently there were gaps in the known life of the star, or else a French newspaper, moved by the sentiment of the occasion, had for once seen fit to be discreet.

As to the bridegroom, the account was more specific. He was rich, a well-known patron of the greenroom, a widower who had quarreled with his son. Through a thinly veiled irony of the flattering phrases, one

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seemed to glimpse a man half *declassé*, a successful speculator, a ne'er-do-well of abundant means and imperious passions.

This was interesting, but it certainly was not the touch needed to give definite shape to the case in hand.

"I'd rather know something about that St. Cloud scrape," reflected Lepadou. "If Ninette really went there to meet a lover, then that would at least account for——"

His thought was interrupted by a boy's voice shouting through the doorway:

"Quick, boss; Dey won't let me in—an' somethin' awful has happened."

"What is it?" demanded the detective, striding quickly to where Le Squelette was struggling in the hands of an attendant.

"Everyt'ing, boss. Miss Jayne is miss-in'—an' so is dat guy, Benson."

Le Squelette had been playing to hard luck. In the first place, though spared the knowledge that François had failed him, he was forced to pass the entire night in the gypsy's cellar. It was a situation which for a while robbed him of his self-possession.

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But he ended by lying down on the floor of his dungeon and crying himself to sleep.

When he woke it was still dark; yet he felt that it must be day outside, and for a while renewed his efforts to attract attention. But either the walls were too thick or the neighborhood deserted. Nobody came.

The morning wore away, and he marked its hours by no other clock than his stomach. Hunger, however, did not bring back the terrors of the night before. It no longer seemed at all likely that the gypsy intended either to starve or to poison him. She was only trying to frighten him—whether out of revenge or to get some information, he did not know. In either case she would have to come and see him, and in delaying so long she had given him time to mature a plan.

He became very quiet, listening with all his ears, and when the old woman finally removed the obstruction from the window and looked in, he was on his face in a farther corner, sobbing like one whose heart is broken and strength almost gone. He



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answered nothing to her call, and she was forced to enter.

“Listen, boy,” she said, getting down on her hands and knees beside him. “I don’t want to hurt you unless I have to. But you’re mixing yourself up in something you don’t understand.”

“Oh—oo—yes, mum!”

Le Squelette peeked out of the corner of his eye. His ears had not deceived him. She had neglected to refasten the door.

“Then tell me what you’ve found out, and who’s been employing you?”

There was no answer. Le Squelette, suddenly fired with energy, had leaped over the crouching figure and was off like a shot.

He was several blocks away before he remembered the marrons, and he had the temerity to go back and look for them. But the outer door of the warehouse was now locked, nor could he discover any other way of entrance. He gave up an attempt to force the lock, and turned his steps towards the quai Béthune, hoping to pick up some reassuring news of Jayne. Perhaps the boss



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had caught up with her and induced her to return home. Perhaps there had been a fight with Benson. Anyway, something must have happened.

There was a crowd about the house, but he decided to carry out his original idea—which was to apply to the concierge in the quality of a boy whose one hope in life was to secure a bit of temporary employment. He was met at the door of the lodge by an impatient oath:

“*Va t'en, parbleu!* Ain't there trouble enough for one day without street boys comin' to pester me?”

“I know,” said Le Squelette, deciding to put his worst fears into one bold guess and see if it would be denied. “The young ma'm'selle has run away. But I t'ought yeh might want me to take word to somebody, or somethin', an' help find her.”

“How'd you know she'd run away?” cried the concierge. “Here! You come in now and tell me who told you.”

“I heered a couple of flicts (fly cops) talkin', dat was all,” said the boy, evading

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the other's clutch by an inch. "No harm done, *mon vieux*. Ta-ta."

Seizing upon a last hope, he ran to Benson's address. There was a strange clerk on duty.

"I've got a letter for de gent in sixty-seven," Le Squelette explained. "Is he in?"

"Leave it, and I'll see that it gets to him."

"I can't leave it. I was told to give it to 'm direct."

"That's the boy who was here with a message for Mr. Benson the night before last," put in the night clerk, emerging sleepily from the depths of the office. "The gentleman went out last evening, son, and he hasn't come back yet—if that's any good to you."

"My eye! Ain't he de gay bird? But I can't leave nothin'. Me orders was strict."

Once more he had to bound off with a mien of unconcern. It was evident now that something had gone wrong with that message to Les Deux Chiens, and there was nothing to be done but find the boss and leave the whole matter in his hands.

Lepadou was not at his lodgings, but pass-

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ing near the Odéon the boy—chance playing into his hands at last—happened to see him entering the Bibliothèque Nationale. A less keen eye might not have been so certain, for as usual the detective was leaving his identity somewhat in doubt. Le Squelette, however, followed him with the certainty of a hound, and halted only at the entrance of the building, where he discovered a barrier in the form of a stout individual whose movements were strictly controlled by official red tape. It did no good to tell him that there was an absolute necessity for conversation with the party who had just gone in. That was not the attendant's business. He only knew that here was a ragged urchin without a ticket—a pretty sort to be demanding admittance under any circumstances.

There was a parley, conducted chiefly by the boy, as the official preferred to assume that one refusal ended the matter. Finally Le Squelette appeared to fall in with this opinion. But it was a feint. A second later, and he had dodged between the official's legs, and—struggling now with another man in



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uniform—was shouting to his patron that the worst had happened.

Lepadou pacified all parties with a liberal application of that which is known in Paris argot as “*galette*” (“paste”), and would listen to no details till they were outside. At the mention of the marrons he interjected:

“What! You found candies in the Boncoeur house, and didn’t tell me?”

“I didn’t have the nerve, boss. For after I’d hooked ’em from Jayne’s room, de gypsy cops ’em off a me w’ile I was restin’ on de curbstone, as easy ’s if I was a child. But I only meant to git ’em ag’in before I told yeh.”

“Here’s a pretty kettle of fish,” groaned the detective, when he had heard the whole story of his subordinate’s activities. “You didn’t get the marrons, you know nothing about the marrons, and we’ve let Jayne slip through our fingers. However, I’ve too much to do to stand here and cry over spilled milk.”

“An’ w’at am I to do?” asked Le Squelette as the other turned to go.



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“You?” Lepadou laughed with a sudden return of good nature. “Far be it from me to attempt to dictate *your* movements. The mistake in the first place was in putting you in a subordinate position. Hereafter kindly follow your own inclinations, and report to me what you think best—and at your own time.”

“Gee! He’s rubbin’ it in,” sniffed the boy, left standing alone on the sidewalk. “But I *will* dig up somethin’. *That’ll* show ’em.”

The Boncoeur house was by this time beginning to empty itself of the futile policemen who had been sent there as if in response to a riot call when the news of Jayne’s disappearance first reached the commissariat. Boussai and Forgeron had questioned everybody, but unearthed nothing save the stale secret of Jayne’s window shutter. When even these two finally withdrew to the concierge’s lodge, where there was at least the promise of a little refreshment, Madame Boncoeur wheeled herself

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from the dining-room to the foot of the stairs, and called to Pierre Noyeau.

He had just returned from a hurried visit to the *usines*, and came down to her at once. Then he gently wheeled her into Jayne's deserted room, where they might talk without fear of interruption.

"I don't know what I would do without you, Pierre," she sighed, her eyes lighting up—and, robbed of their habitual coldness, they seemed like any other eyes. "Ninette gone. Jayne gone. You are all I have left. And now I'll never be able to call you son."

"It's not your fault, and you've always been like a mother to me. Besides, we're going to get Jayne back."

Madame Boncoeur shook her head.

"No; we'll never find her. And I'm to blame. I thought she cared for you, so I told her what plans we'd made. There must be another man in this, Pierre, or she would never have been driven to such a step."

"I'm afraid there is—and I think I've seen him."

"Who?"

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“I don’t know his name. But we passed a man one day when we were out, and he looked at Jayne very strangely.”

“Probably you’re right, then. But I’d rather she’d had her lover—any lover—rather than this. If I’d only cut out my tongue!”

“Just what did you tell her?” asked Noyeau, resting a hand on her shoulder.

“I caught her coming in at night through this wretched shutter of hers, and I was frightened. But she said she had been out looking to meet you. So I told her that you and she were to be married as soon as it would be decent to permit it. If only you hadn’t fancied you were in love with Ninette in the first place, Jayne could have been brought up to think of you. What ever possessed you not to prefer Jayne?”

Noyeau stepped back so that the emotion which for a moment showed itself in his face could not be seen by the woman in the chair, and responded carelessly after a pause:

“We mustn’t reproach each other for what is past.”



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“No, no! I’m not reproaching you, though you’re the only one who ever dared to be headstrong in this house. You know what obstacles are to me.”

“Let us surmount them, then. I shall try to find Jayne, that’s the first thing. She is so young and inexperienced that whatever she had done she——”

Before Noyeau could finish, hysterical shrieks sounded from the floor above; then Charlotte’s voice, crying:

“The master! The master! Oh, my God! *Quel malheur!* What is going to happen to us all?”

“What is it, Charlotte?” demanded Noyeau, stepping out into the hall.

At the same moment Boussai and Forge-ron came bounding up from below stairs.

“What is the matter?”

“Stop that horrible noise and tell us what is wrong.”

“The master!” repeated Charlotte, her voice breaking on a shrill note.

The three men pushed past her and arrived together at Boncoeur’s bedchamber.



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The door stood open, as did the window beyond, and at first sight the empty room gave no sign of anything extraordinary. Over the edge of the window-sill, however, there was the end of a cord. It had been wrenched from one of the Venetian blinds, and was securely tied to the radiator. The other end led out into space.

“Hanged himself!” muttered Boussai, looking from the window to the lifeless body which dangled beneath.

## CHAPTER XII

### FORGERON TRIES HIS HAND

MRS. CUIT, the cook, felt that her patience was nearing an end. She had submitted to three official interrogatories with what she considered a wonderful degree of forbearance. And when, late in the evening after the inquest on the body of Boncoeur, she saw Forgeron enter her kitchen evidently with the intention to commandeer a repast, it looked as if irresistible force was about to meet the immovable obstacle at last.

But the immovable obstacle was a trenchant female, of the sort that habitually stands with its arms akimbo, and before her two hundred pounds of authoritative fat the officer's two hundred and fifty of mere muscle began to lose confidence.

"What are you hanging around for?" the cook demanded, pressing her advantage.

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“Haven’t you cops seen enough crimes happen under your noses? Or are you hopin’ to be present when the end comes, and the rest of us here finds ourselves with our throats cut?”

“I was only goin’ to ask you,” stammered Forgeron, “I was only goin’ to ask you for a fryin’-pan and some eggs.”

Mrs. Cuit, who had expected a request for prepared food, abandoned her commanding pose in front of the range and lifted her hands in astonishment.

“A fryin’-pan and some eggs,” she repeated. “What do you want with eggs?”

“I’d like to break them into a bowl rubbed with garlic, if you’ll let me fix one,” said the inspector with returning assurance. “Say half a dozen eggs, if you don’t mind. Then I was allowing to beat them up a bit—not too much—with a silver fork, and put in some salt and pepper. And if you’ve got a fryin’-pan that’s always been cleaned without water—say by bein’ heated up with a little salt and wiped dry with paper—I thought maybe I’d grease it and stir the eggs a few

## FORGERON TRIES HIS HAND

seconds in the pan, and in about five minutes turn out what you might call an omelet.”

“*Mon Dieu!* If you can use your hands as well as you do your tongue, I’ll have to look out for my job.”

But she produced the articles required, and watched—with the air of a music critic at a piano recital—while the police officer went through the motions he had outlined. And at the crucial moment, when the omelet had to be neatly folded over upon itself, she even put into his hands the thin-bladed instrument with which the feat must be accomplished. Forgeron wielded the “slice,” as this instrument is called, with the firm touch of a master, exposing an undersurface of egg cooked to a delicious brown.

“As I’m alive, you’ve done it! Here, sit down at the table. You’ll want some coffee with that. I’ll have it ready in a jiffy. And say a chop or two. Why haven’t you dropped into the kitchen before? I declare, I believe I’ll have another bite myself—and something to wash it down with.”

In five minutes the two experts were



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chatting like old friends, Forgeron dilating eloquently on the wonder of the chops, coffee and creamed potatoes which had been set before him, smacking his lips after every swallow of the old bottled ale, and listening with rapt attention to the bits of culinary wisdom which formed the staple of Mrs. Cuit's conversation; while she on her side condescended to ask him for several of his recipes, even going so far as to taste of the omelet and to pronounce it "pretty good for anybody and wonderful for a *flic*."

Forgeron beamed. He had not dreamed that the ruse suggested by Lepadou could succeed so well. But he was careful not to force the situation, and it was not till several days had gone by and these feasts became a regular nightly routine, that anything was said save in the most general way of the dark mysteries which had come upon the house. Then finally the cook led up to the subject herself by exclaiming:

"Ain't this like life, now? Here we are, enjoyin' ourselves—and three in the family already dead and gone, or worse. You

## FORGERON TRIES HIS HAND

ought to be ashamed, comin' around at such a time with your *blague*."

"I'm as sorrowful as it's possible for a man to be with two helpings of such a salad as yours inside of him, Mrs. Cuit. And I *do* feel how it's hard on the mistress, losin' a husband and two daughters."

"Cut down her part about two-thirds," said the cook. "Le Glaçon ain't cryin' her eyes out over the old man, or over Ninette either."

"Le Glaçon?"

"Yes. I found out when I first come to this house that that was the name some folks had for Madame Boncoeur. And an icicle she is, though she's fond enough of M'sieu Noyeau, and certainly doted on Jayne."

"She didn't love Ninette?"

"Ninette? Well, I could just tell you a thing or two about that—if I had a mind."

"But I thought she was the spoiled child?"

"Maybe she was. You think that's the same thing? Shows how much *you* know about love, M'sieu Forgeron."

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“I’m learnin’ more every evenin’, though,” said the policeman, suppressing a groan and consciously extending his arm towards his neighbor’s waist.

“Stuff!”

The Amazon lifted a salad-fork—threateningly but without malice.

“We’re too old for such nonsense,” she went on with a sigh. “You like my salad; I like your intelligence and handsome figure. That’s enough. Though if you weren’t with the police I could even go further and make you my friend. A body does need someone to talk to in dreadful times like these.”

“I don’t belong to the police to any injurious extent,” Forgeron protested in an injured tone. “If you knew what I had to put up with! When it comes to talkin’, maybe I could say a thing or two, myself.”

“You mean you don’t tell the commissaire everything you know?”

“Boussai? Come now, do you tell everything to Le Glaçon, as you call her? I obey orders. But I keep my theories to myself.



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A poor *inspecteur* ain't expected to *know* anything."

"If it ain't just like being a cook!" Mrs. Cuit emptied half a pint down her spacious throat and gazed pensively at the bottom of the glass. "There's Charlotte, here. She sides with the mistress as if she was one of the family. But I—I'm only so much dirt to either of 'em. At the same time, if a real murderer knew as much as I do he wouldn't have to worry any. I could tell him a few things."

"Let's suppose, for the sake of argument, that *I* am the murderer," put in Forgeron in an absent-minded tone.

"La! And so you are—a lady-killer. *That* for your impudence—and for slanderin' the good heart you have, maybe, in spite of all!"

Mrs. Cuit seized her guest's face between her capable palms, and kissed him with the air of one surrendering to superior force. Settling back into her chair, she continued:

"I'll tell you this much. There was a time



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once when Charlotte was near bein' turned out into the street."

"You mean that Charlotte's the one the real murderer could shift the crime to if he knew? I thought it was Le Glaçon."

"Just you stick to your toddy, and let me finish. I don't know who's the real murderer. But Ninette never killed herself. Just lately she was beginnin' to look happy. Anyone could have seen it."

"She wasn't always happy?"

"No. From the time I first came here it was always fine things and do as you please for Ninette, and hard work and stay at home for Jayne. But when anyone had any *love* to dispose of, it was Jayne that got it. One day Ninette had a finer present than ever—a pearl necklace fit for a queen. But you can bet I wouldn't be mentionin' it except in talkin' this way, one friend to another, where nothing'll be repeated so as to do harm."

"I don't see any harm in a necklace, anyway," suggested Forgeron.

"No? Well there was in this one, for it

## FORGERON TRIES HIS HAND

disappeared. 'And who do you suppose was suspected of takin' it?'"

"Not Charlotte?"

"Right, the first time. I heard Le Glaçon call her a thief with my own ears. The necklace wasn't found, but Charlotte stayed right on. What would you make of a thing like that, now, if it was to come to you in a case you was workin' on?"

"Looks almost like Charlotte havin' some hold over the old woman, a sort of a set-off which made them cry quits."

"M'sieu Forgeron, your brains ain't *all* in your stomach—I can see that. And here's another thing. That same necklace, or one so near like it as to be a miracle, was given to Jayne by her parents on her birthday—the day before Ninette died. Now what?"

"That's a puzzler. It might mean they no longer cared what Ninette thought—that they looked on her as bein' as good as dead already. Or——"

"Go on!" cried Mrs. Cuit.

"—Or it might mean that they'd been

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holdin' off only for Jayne to get old enough to wear the jewelry."

"Yes."

"Or maybe," concluded the inspector lamely, "it didn't mean anything at all."

"I agree with every word you've said." Mrs. Cuit paused only to refill the empty glasses. "But there's more. Years ago, before I came, Ninette had a brother about her own age. She was very fond of him—so much so that the poor child got it into her head that it was wicked. And when he died she wrote a letter sayin' that the angels had took him to save her soul from sin, and that she was goin' to follow him. Romantic nonsense, of course, and nothin' came of it. But her mother found that letter and kept it. Don't ask me how I know. But she did."

"There are ways of findin' out things," said Forgeron, confidentially.

"There are. And—well, her mother kept it. What for, what do you think? Ask Charlotte, and she could tell you. She kept it—to use *when the time came!*

"It came when the hunt was goin' on for



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the lost necklace. Ninette got sick. Maybe it was from worryin' about her jewels. But it was only a heavy cold at first. Then she got worse. The doctor was sent for. And—will you believe me? It wasn't the regular family doctor, but a new one—a dreadful looking man. That very morning I'd heard Le Glaçon call Charlotte a thief. and seen Charlotte go to pack up her things.

“But as the doctor came out she slipped into the sick-room, and at that minute Ninette got up out of bed and threw the medicine out of the window—not only what the doctor had left but some that her mother had been givin' her. Charlotte turns to Le Glaçon, who was in the room, and begins to cry. I was just outside the door—hid, you might say, behind a coat-rack that was standin' in the hall, and I'm not ashamed to own it. Someone had to be on the lookout when things like this was goin' on.”

“I should say so, Mrs. Cuit. But—Charlotte began to cry?”

“Yes, and to scream: *‘I may be a thief, but I ain't no murderess, and I don't keep*



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*silly girls' suicide letters in hopes of coverin' up my tracks afterwards.'* Her very words, and I'm not likely to forget 'em in a hurry. While we'd supposed her to be packin', she'd been huntin' through Madame Boncoeur's papers. She'd found that letter. And when she takes it out and waves it, Le Glaçon collapsed on the floor. It was her first stroke—she's had a second one since—and I had to be sent for to help get her on a bed. Some day she'll have a third, and that'll finish her."

Forgeron moistened his throat.

"Has—has Charlotte that letter yet?"

"Who knows? *Môlez vous vos affaires*—mind your own business—that's my motto—and keep a quiet tongue in your head if you don't want to come to harm. And I always acts upon it."

"A good motto, too," affirmed Forgeron. "Why should we waste our time on other people? For, after all—it's a fine woman you are, Mrs. Cuit, say what you will against my mentionin' it."

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“La! You can talk like that, and death all around us.”

The fine woman leaned towards the flatterer as if to emphasize the reproof by threatening annihilation. But Forgeron bore up under his burden like Atlas beneath a world, and it was from a head safely supported by his ample chest that the following words proceeded:

“Death all around us, right in this very kitchen, maybe, ready to take me after the others. And you, monster that you are—you would talk to me of love if I would let you. I know you very well. You don’t care *what* happens to me.”

“How can you say that?” groaned the officer.

“Perhaps I shouldn’t. It might be taken by heaven for impiety, and then—*ugh!*”

A shudder comparable to a seismic disturbance shook the speaker, whose own words had raised before her a specter of dread against which not even a man seemed sufficient protection.

“I’m *afraid!*” she choked, beginning to

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dampen Forgeron's waistcoat with tears. "And there's somethin' even you've been afraid to mention. Yet I know you're thinkin' about it all the time."

"What?"

"M'sieu Boncoeur. His window opened on an air-shaft and not direct on the court, you must have noticed that."

"Yes, but——"

"Why, then nobody saw him. How do we know that he jumped out with that rope around his neck? Maybe he had to jump."

"It isn't possible," said Forgeron, soothingly, yet with an undertone of agitation in his voice. "Noyeau was downstairs talking to Madame Boncoeur. Boussai and I were with the concierge, and there were no other men in the house. Besides, he left a note."

"Maybe it was forged."

"But it isn't likely that a woman could force him to hang himself, even if a man could."

"You make it worse," gasped Mrs. Cuit. "If it wasn't a man or a woman, what was it that he saw? Ninette, Jayne, the mas-

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ter—all gone, and only those two old witches, Charlotte and Le Glaçon, left. It begins to look supernatural. I hardly have the courage to eat my own cooking, and I wouldn't stay here another minute if it wasn't for a big *blagueur* who comes sometimes to wheedle a poor soul out of a dinner and means to rob her of who knows what before he's through."

Forgeron made no comment, for his thoughts had shot off on a startled tangent. Speaking of disappearances, why, come to think, he knew of another one. Where was Lepadou? He had not seen the great detective now for days and days.



## CHAPTER XIII

### LE SQUELETTE'S PROMENADE

**L**E SQUELETTE was like a dog without a master, though at first the prospect of being left to his own resources hadn't been so bad. He had wanted a little time in which to retrieve himself. But when all Paris began to echo with the news of Boncoeur being found hanging out of a window at the end of a rope, and still Lepadou persisted in giving no signs of life, the boy for once lost confidence.

There was no use in arguing that the boss had often been missing before, and for days instead of hours, or that his enemies, whoever they were, must be of necessity weak and brainless fellows compared with the boss himself. Ordinarily that sort of thing was all very well. But one was alone now, and without even the heart to boast. The

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first night after the beginning of his independence he cried himself to sleep, quite like an ordinary child, and even in the days that followed he had to confess to all manner of unmanly longings.

“Gee!” he muttered one afternoon as he wandered aimlessly through the Latin Quarter. “I b’lieve I’m beginnin’ to miss my mother—an’ I never had one.”

At that moment his feelings were much relieved by the sight of François, the false messenger, approaching alone and unsuspecting. Le Squelette had sought François not only in vain but with the haunting suspicion that the boy, while keeping out of sight, was covertly watching him. He had also felt a growing animosity towards himself among the other gamins of the neighborhood, which he laid at François’ door. Who else could have invented that offensive expression, “*flic’s gosse*,” (detective’s stool-pigeon) which now not infrequently greeted his ear when he attempted to join a group of his former companions?

“Dis is w’at I calls a good day,” he

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gloated as he seized the surprised François by the wrists.

“*Qu’y a t’il?* What’re you goin’ to do?”

“T’row yeh into de river, of course. W’y didn’t yeh go to Les Deux Chiens like I told yeh?”

“I did,” cried the other boy, struggling helplessly. “Your man wasn’t there.”

“W’y didn’t yeh come an’ tell me?”

They had reached the *pont neuf* by this time, and Le Squelette was intent on a plan to launch his captive over the parapet. But he remembered in time that he had already too many indiscretions to his account.

“I’ll do it next time,” he threatened, releasing his hold. “Just you keep away from me.”

This was a tame ending to what had promised to be an exciting episode, but he was trying to be worthy of the master whom he had already begun to lament as dead. For by this time he was beginning to suspect that not even Lepadou’s was the last disappearance to be added to the long list.

It was being kept quiet. Nothing was



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said of it in the papers. But it was certain that Pierre Noyeau had left the management of the *usines* to other hands, and was no longer to be found at any of the places which he had formerly frequented. The gossip in these places said that he was away looking for Jayne. But what if it should be false? What if there were some monstrous thing or influence at work? There certainly seemed to be—something which swallowed people up without sound or forewarning.

Of the gypsy nothing had been seen, either. But as if to make up for this, Le Squelette had been approached by a younger and altogether different sort of woman—almost a fine lady, though something tawdry in her note of elegance did not escape his practiced powers of observation. She had followed him into the Luxembourg and asked him flatly what had become of “that dear M’sieu Lepadou.”

“Aw, he ain’t ‘dearin’ ’ the likes of you,” had been his retort.

Whereupon she had looked so unhappy



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that he was sorry, and asked her quite civilly what it was that she wanted.

“There was an important business matter he was to look after,” she answered. “He promised to write, and hasn’t. You’re his boy, so I thought you’d know where I could find him.”

“How’d yeh know I was his boy?”

“He told me.”

“How’d yeh know I was the one he told yeh about?”

“I mean—he pointed yeh out.”

“Now I *know* you’re lyin’. He’d never give away my *disguise*. Yeh has been snoopin’ around, dat’s all, an’ yeh better git out w’ile the gittin’ is good.”

He wondered now if he ought to have attempted to shadow her. Could it be that she had some connection with the Boncoeur affair? It seemed likely enough, and if he ever succeeded in getting in touch with any of the actors in that drama again it would be through some such unexpected channel as this. One’s brain didn’t work when one

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was lonesome. But regrets were useless. and——

Was it possible that fate could be as good as this? There, bearing down upon him from the other end of the bridge, was the tawdry lady herself.

“W’at yeh want now?” he demanded, as she halted before him.

“I’ve been thinking—Le Squelette is your name, isn’t it?”

“Never mind me name.”

“Anyway, I’ve been thinking—you *must* know where your master is. And there is something I want to tell him. I’ve decided to tell it to you.”

“Tellin’ is free, lady.”

“Yes, but not here. Somebody might see us. Will you come with me?”

“Not much. I’ve had me stomach full of comin’ wid folks. Maybe yeh lives in a cellar. I’ve had enough of cellars, whether dey belongs to young women or old.”

“I don’t know what you mean by cellars. But come, anyway, and walk along the street

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if you're afraid. Aren't you interested in Jayne? I'll tell you as we go."

Le Squelette hesitated. But the temptation once more to rely upon himself was too strong, and with only the slightest shiver of apprehension, he permitted his guide to lead him from the crowded boulevard into that quiet region which extends to the left as one walks from the Seine towards the heights of Montparnasse. And this time, as the sequel proved, he was to have no reason to regret his journey.

## CHAPTER XIV

### TWO VIEWS OF AVIGNON

LEPADOU, having finally decided to probe the mystery of Ninette's death, Squid or no Squid, refused to be turned aside by the current of subsequent events. He even put off investigating the woman in the Bois and the disappearance of Jayne, while the news of Boncoeur's tragic end, when it finally reached him, merely spurred him on to follow the original trail.

He had, in fact, established himself at Avignon, at the Hôtel de l'Europe, under a false name and as an American tourist—and all on account of a packet of cigarettes, a box of matches and five words in a newspaper. The words were these: "*bridegroom has estates near Avignon*," from the item in the old copy of "*Le Figaro*" describing L'Alouette's marriage to the Count de Montfayat.



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Now Avignon is in the Midi, a region liable to be rendered almost uninhabitable for days at a time in any season of the year by that chilly and indescribably disagreeable northwest wind known as the mistral. The Tison match—the sort that was found in Ninette's room—is here in almost universal use. It is in the same section of the south of France that the Levant cigarette is most common—probably because, being so poorly made, the inhabitants of regions less accustomed to discomfort refuse to tolerate it.

Three very slender threads, and hardly amounting to a clew even when taken together. But the detective could not get rid of the conviction that the girl had been away from home just prior to the tragedy, and that something important had happened. The absence of any reference to the visit in Boussai's *procès-verbal* proved nothing but that the family might have had some motive sufficiently strong to induce them to unite in a scheme of concealment.

So to Avignon, that ancient city of the popes, he went, choosing it as the most likely

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spot, and for several days did nothing which a genuine tourist might not have done.

He admired the ramparts—those great walls which, in a wonderful state of preservation, enclose the town and make of it one of the most perfect examples of surviving mediævalism in Europe. He explored the abandoned Chartreuse monastery at Villeneuve, across the river; saw the fourteenth century ivory Virgin; watched the quaint water-mills along the rue des Teinturiers; set his watch by the moving figure of Le Jaquemart above the clock of the Mairie; visited the bullring; tried to imagine the splendid pageantry of other days as he looked up at the austere façade of the Palais des Papes; climbed to see the matchless bells of the cathedral, which bathe all Avignon a dozen times a day in a limpid flood of the music of the Church; wondered at the bridge, with the chapel of St. Bénézet at its ruined center, which is said to have been built over the Rhone in obedience to a dream; frequented the fine shops that—in streets too narrow for any kind of wheeled

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traffic—excite the admiration of visitors; mingled with the crowds which all night long throng the Place Hôtel de Ville at the end of the one modern thoroughfare that runs from the station; reveled in the beauty of that elevated park—it would be called a *mesa* in the West—once the garden of the popes and still worthy of the name—which yields such a superb view over the tiled roofs of the town; saw from this vantage-point the towers of Fort St. André, the tower of Philippe le Bel, and (on clear days) the summit of Mont Venteux, famous for its vipers. And he took his coffee regularly at the Café des Negociants.

This was not the way a detective would be expected to work, but he believed that some extraordinary personality—whether Marle's or not—lay at the back of the puzzle he had set out to solve—a personality which would never be uncovered by expected and conventional means. So why not begin by feeling out the spirit of this strange old town? Certainly nobody would ever expect him to do that.



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He soon began to sense, too, that he was accomplishing something, though he continued to reproach himself for paying any attention to such intangible impressions as those which filled his mind.

One day, from the high summit of the gardens, while looking across the river to the square-shouldered tower of Philippe le Bel, built in the time of Jeanne d'Arc, he saw a tiny white object fluttering from a window near the very top of the tower, for all the world like a handkerchief waved by an outstretched arm. The tower, he knew, had long been in charge of the French government, which busies itself with the repair and upkeep of every monument of great artistic or historic interest in the country. And since it was not down on the list of buildings made accessible to tourists, it was not likely that the tower was visited by a single human being for months and months at a time. The more singular for it to show signs of being inhabited now.

He unslung his field-glasses and studied the fluttering white spot attentively. The



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result was disappointing. At that distance—nearly half a mile—it was impossible to be sure that it was even a handkerchief, though it still looked rather like one. But it was certainly not being waved by anybody. Either it was tied to one of the bars of the window, or had accidentally caught there.

Lepadou was conscious of an impulse to investigate further, but he ignored it. Really, he was becoming too impractical. It would be no great feat for the mistral to lift a handkerchief or any other handy bit of cloth from some neighboring clothes-line, and fling it up against the *gratins*. Before it blew away again it might easily have rusted fast to the rough and crumbling iron. Rationally considered, the tower promised nothing at all.

But that other instinctive feeling, the sense of the city itself having a secret, was harder to crush down. It had come upon him gradually as he watched the horrible specimens of humanity that crept out upon the Place after nightfall, chiefly from the direction of the rue des Grottes. Explora-

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tion of the rue des Grottes in the daytime showed it to be the worst slum of which he had any knowledge—a slum built of age-defying stone. The streets of the quarter were not only unbelievably narrow, dark and crooked, but steep—often mere flights of steps—mere paths—over which trickled a liquid ooze, the odor of which followed him almost to his own hotel. The inhabitants were ragged, deformed, leprous.

He had thought at first that Avignon was the most beautiful city he had ever seen, and sometimes when the air was vibrating with the golden concussions of its innumerable bells, had caught himself wondering if this were not the place to look for some surviving remnant of the unreckoning heroism, devotion and romance of the Middle Ages.

But he began finally to realize that a city which could tolerate those verminous creatures from the rue des Grottes must have something wrong about it. The faces he saw at some of the wine-shops did much to help this belief, as did the altogether too numerous accounts of midnight killings to be found

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in the daily papers. And was there not in the suburbs that horrible little inclosure where bullfights were held every Sunday afternoon? Not the devotion and heroism of the Middle Ages, but their darkness, cruelty and degredation—that was what had come down. From being a holy city, Avignon had become as fine a spot for the perpetration of strange villainies as any upon earth.

“If there were a monster criminal who didn’t have the luck to be born here,” he ruminated, “he’d certainly be drawn to the place by sheer fascination. It may be merely moonshine. But I feel—it’s as if even the dreadful reek of some of these gutters were trying to tell me something—or trying not to tell. I don’t know.”

It was in the Café des Negociants, however—a resort entirely modern, respectable and neither sublime nor degraded—that he found a man who could give him facts instead of atmosphere.

M’sieu Niort was a stoop-shouldered, insignificant little citizen, who wore spectacles



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and an air of genteel poverty. He saw Lepadou reading an English paper, and introduced himself as one who spoke “some of the English, too”—a pretext quite sufficient for the sort of bore which Niort proved to be.

He was a collector of local antiquities, and at once began to recite the history of the region from the days of Christ down to the time when the wife of J. Stewart Mill was taken ill while visiting Avignon with her philosopher husband, and died there.

The detective was patient, hoping that among so much chaff there would finally appear a little wheat. So the next day he not only permitted his new acquaintance to conduct him to the cemetery and to Mrs. Mills’ grave, but let him lead him through the Papal Palace and the gardens—all as if he had never seen any of these places before.

From the heights of the gardens Niort grew eloquent over the view across the valley.

“Do you see that old gray château off there to the south?” he said finally, pointing.



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“It looks like a stone thumb from here, but it’s the property of the late Count de Montfayat, and well worth a visit.”

“I’d like to go there,” said Lepadou, concealing his sudden interest under a tone of mere politeness. “It’s abandoned now, I suppose?”

“Abandoned? No, since the count’s death his widow lives there—though so quietly that few people are ever invited inside the grounds. But if you’d been here a month or so ago—it’s nearer two months now—she gave a ball. In fact she had guests for several weeks, and quite came out of her seclusion.”

“Young guests?”

“Some of them. There was one—a very beautiful young lady—who used to come driving into town almost every day with a gentleman of about her own age—or a little more—who was staying there.”

Niort did not know the young lady’s name, though he understood that she was related to the countess.

“It was Ninette, by all the powers!”

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thought Lepadou, but he did not speak.

“I met the young gentleman,” Niort went on. “He came in here one day, and we got to talking. He calls himself M’sieu Benson.”

Lepadou suppressed a start.

“I thought it extraordinary,” persisted Niort, “for it’s almost the same as *Bienson*, the family name of the old count.”

Lepadou rose from his seat with a suddenness which barely escaped being a leap. *Bienson, Comte de Montfayat!* He had had a son by his first wife. What more likely than that L’Alouette, his widow, being sought out by this long-unheard-of young scapegrace, had tried to do justice to everybody who might think themselves entitled to her estate by planning a match between him and her own daughter? That would imply that the count was not that daughter’s father. But the same supposition would explain her anxiety to foist Ninette upon the family of her wardrobe-woman, and made the girl’s identity clearer than ever. The old count’s son might have been the St.

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Cloud lover, even then hovering around the unknown and carefully disowned child of the singer.

And there was Jayne—had she not been on her way to keep an appointment with a man named Benson when last seen alive? The *juge d'instruction* thought that the count's son had gone to America. Changing Bienson to Benson would be just the thing he'd be likely to do in the United States. It would almost do itself.

Benson and Bienson, then, were one. Here at last seemed to be the filament connecting the beautiful Avignon—scene of past splendors and present social gayeties—with the vile Avignon, fit *locale* for crime and betrayal. There was a single man with two characters. It seemed to connect, too, the fate of Jayne with that of Ninette.

He fairly raced for the Rhone side of the gardens, and once more turned his glasses on the tower of Philippe le Bel.

“What now?” cried Niort as he came panting up. “I thought you'd been stung by a viper.”

## TWO VIEWS OF AVIGNON

“Just happened to think of something. I wanted to catch a view of the sunset. But it isn’t as gorgeous as usual.”

“You’ve got the wrong direction,” laughed the bore.

“No matter,” said the detective. “It’s a bit early, anyway. But I would like to visit the countess’ château. Could we arrange it for to-morrow?”

Niort eagerly assenting, he put away his binoculars and prepared to return to his hotel. The fluttering white spot had gone from Philippe le Bel. It had only been a wind-blown rag, then, and not a handkerchief tied in place to serve as a signal of distress.

Besides, what was he thinking of? Jayne had gone away voluntarily. And if Benson had meant well enough by her to bring her to Avignon, surely he would have taken her to the suburban home of his ancestors. All this reasoning was wrong. There was nothing whatever to connect Jayne with a possible thieves’ haunt like the tower.



## CHAPTER XV

### THE TOWER OF PHILIPPE LE BEL

JAYNE had set out to keep her appointment with the fairy prince without dreaming that the accommodating boy, who had taken her letter and refused a tip, had more than squared accounts by subsequently breaking the seal and betraying her secret to a detective. And in fact it was of no consequence. For before she had gone six blocks Le Squelette was busy with the gypsy, and François, his messenger, was taking a route which certainly would never bring him to Lepadou. So the situation was the same as if the correspondence had not been tampered with.

It would be too much to say that Jayne was at ease in her mind. Yet she felt no particular disquiet until she saw a man stepping out from behind a tree and planting himself squarely in her path.

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“Miss Jayne Boncoeur, I believe,” he said, respectfully touching his cap—a chauffeur’s cap, with the goggles shoved up so as to show a pale but not unattractive face. “Do not be afraid, please. Mr. Benson sent me here to tell you he couldn’t come to the intended place. And he wants to see you right away. I’m to take you to him, so he says.”

“But who are you?” asked Jayne, trembling, notwithstanding the fellow’s almost obsequious manner. “How did you know where to look for me?”

“I’m his man, Miss. And he told me to look for you somewhere along about here.”

“How did you know me?”

“I didn’t. But he described you, and when I spoke your name you answered. There aren’t many people out at this hour. It’s pretty late.”

It *was* late, and the old-fashioned gas lamps of the quarter merely served to emphasize the emptiness of the thoroughfares. Jayne cast a timid glance around her, wishing that she had more experience to tell her

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whether the situation was to be taken at its face value or otherwise.

“Why couldn’t he come himself?” she ventured.

“That I don’t know, Miss. But I think the young master is in some sort of trouble—that he’s afraid of being followed, if you’ll excuse my saying so. Anyway, he’s waiting for you just a few blocks from here. This is my machine, and if you’ll kindly get in——”

He had led her to a waiting limousine, and she jumped in before he could finish. If the fairy prince was in trouble, that was another matter. Pierre, perhaps, was the one who was following him. Pierre had been morose and jealous ever since that unfortunate encounter at *l’arène*. And this was just a plan to escape his vigilance.

She tried to banish another idea which had crossed her mind as she stood for a second, irresolute, with her foot upon the step of the car just before Benson’s trouble had been mentioned—the idea that if she hesitated too long the smooth-spoken stranger was prepared to seize her and thrust her into

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the vehicle by force. It was too absurd. And yet when he got in and took a seat facing her instead of assuming a position at the wheel, while another chauffeur appeared from she could not say where and leaped into the driver's place, she wished she had made more certain. It was strange that M'sieu Benson should keep two chauffeurs, and that one of them should have the impertinence to behave as a passenger. But his manner continued to be sufficiently deferential. Also they were in motion. Before she had time to collect herself, they were drawing near to an open car.

“There he is,” said her companion.

Jayne tried to lower a window, only to find it stuck fast. But she saw someone turn and wave a hand towards her, making her heart give a grateful flutter of relief. At that instant the other car put on speed and drew rapidly ahead.

“I want to get out and go to him,” she cried. “What is that driver thinking of? And why don't we hurry?”



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“You recognized M’sieu Benson, didn’t you, Miss?”

“Yes, but——”

“Then it’s all right. He ordered us not to overtake him till we’re just outside the city.”

There was something in the tone of this explanation which she did not like, and she suddenly became conscious of her imprudence in starting out with her pearl necklace around her neck. But hadn’t she seen her lover with her own eyes? Since he knew where she was and where she was being taken, what could be amiss?

“I don’t blame you for being a little worried,” she heard her companion saying. “It’s an important step you’re taking. I hope you’ve considered it.”

“What step?” she cried, suddenly aroused by this burst of impertinence.

“Why, I thought it was an elopement. Isn’t it? I’m a sort of confidential servant. He tells me most things, and he let me think that this was a runaway between you two. Excuse my saying so, but the fact is

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I don't much like the job. If you're not entirely keen on it yourself——”

Jayne shrank back and hid her face in the cushions. She could say nothing now without having this odious servant trying to thrust himself into her confidence—a consideration which kept her silent for a long time.

Street after street flew past the windows. They were beyond the *barrière* and at the beginning of a lonely road. Must this not be the place of rendezvous? Yes—the engine was being put to its best paces, as if bent upon overtaking the car ahead. But it never seemed to gain. She could see the tail lights of the forward car whenever the turn of the road afforded a view of the distance. Yet the quarter of a mile between the two vehicles did not lessen.

Paris was miles behind now, and monstrous images invaded her imagination—at first vaguely, then with ever-increasing distinctness till it was only their very enormity which prevented her from accepting them as real.

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“I never remember hearing Mr. Benson speak of you,” she brought out at last, drawing the remnants of her courage together and confronting her companion. “What is your name?”

“Some calls me La Haquenée, Miss. But it’s hardly a name.”

“I never heard of it.”

The man lowered a window, and shouted to the chauffeur:

“Listen to this. The young lady says she never heard of La Haquenée.”

“Keep your mouth shut. Nobody hired you to pronounce names,” was the gruff answer.

Jayne, thoroughly alarmed, stood up, clutching an arm-support.

“Stop the car!” she cried. “Stop it and turn around. I shan’t go any farther. I don’t know where you are taking me.”

“Don’t be a fool, little one,” said the man with the *Apache* name. “Here we are.”

The car ahead had come to a standstill, and the limousine was soon nearly abreast of it. Then she saw a masked figure stand-

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ing by the roadside holding a leveled rifle, and heard an order shouted in raucous French:

“Here you, Benson, get out and put up your hands.”

Worse, the order was obeyed. Was there ever such a spectacle as that of the fairy prince in an attitude of surrender, and apparently without a thought of her? The servants, too, were craven. Not one made the least sign of resistance. But suddenly the driver of her own car jerked a lever. The limousine leaped forward, and refused to stop even in response to a shot.

“Good for you, Boquetin,” chuckled La Haquenée, crouching in his seat. “Give her the gas.

“*Nom d’un nom*, that was a narrow squeak,” he went on, wiping his forehead with a dainty handkerchief. “My dear master was heeled, why didn’t he show a little spunk instead of letting us ride right up into the mess that way?”

“But where are you taking me?” de-



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manded Jayne. "We must go back and save him."

"Save a yellow dog like that? I think too much of my skin."

La Haquenée lowered a window and had a whispered consultation with his companion. Then he re-closed the sash and remarked:

"We've decided, Miss, that it wouldn't be safe."

"But you *must* let me out! Why, I believe you're highwaymen yourselves."

"Shouldn't be surprised if we were. Anyway, we've got a boss of our own, now that Benson's disposed of, and I'm sure he wouldn't object to seeing a nice young lady. Why you, with your jewels and your rich father to pay for them and plenty more—you're as simple and easy as a four-year-old. Just the age for kidnapping, in my opinion."

Jayne was about to smash one of the panes with her elbow. But La Haquenée caught her, and when she began to scream forced a handkerchief into her mouth. It was useless to struggle, but she struggled neverthe-

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less and with the virgin energy of a wildcat. Her captor had muscles of iron, but offered no violence save what was necessary to keep her from carrying out her threat.

“That’s better,” he laughed, when she had grown so weak from exhaustion that he could manage her with one hand. “You’re a little previous with this sort of thing. What’s the use of trying to pound me? You’re not *my* game.”

She felt a sharp sting in her arm. A delicious sense of warmth stole through her veins, accompanied by an irresistible tendency in her eyelids to close. Immediately afterwards she was in a land of enchantment, half pleasant, half terrible, where the fairy prince seemed now a fairy indeed and now a grotesque hobgoblin.

When she woke it was daylight, but the sun instead of climbing towards the zenith was settling to the horizon. The machine stood still by an empty stretch of road not far from a yellow, swift-flowing river. The landscape was wooded, without the sign of a habitation. The two men were on the front

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seat, eating from a basket. Seeing her awake, La Haquenée handed her a sandwich.

“Eat that,” he said, “and I’ll give you a cup of coffee. It’s cold, but we’re almost there and it will make you feel better while you’re having your next little nap.”

She was hungry, and had taken both the sandwich and the coffee before the situation had even begun to be clear to her mind. There followed another period of oblivion and equivocal dreams.

She was but half awake when she felt herself being lifted and carried out of the car. Up and up and round and round she went, catching glimpses of something which appeared to be a circle of light flitting over the surface of gray stonework. She thought it must be a part of the dream, till finally she was deposited none too gently upon a certainly substantial cot in a small, bare room, which for no apparent reason impressed her with a dizzy sense of being very, very far from the ground.

There followed the heavy closing of a door, and Jayne was alone.



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She couldn't even yet be awake, she thought. But the cell-like room, whose walls of enormous gray stones were pierced only by a single window—and that too high for her to reach—had a very real appearance. Yet she was seeing it only by the pale light that came in through the grated opening, and her senses were not to be trusted. A natural sleep was trying to take her into its arms. Fatigue made resistance impossible, though she would have liked to investigate her surroundings, and the rest of the night was as sweet as the moonlight.

And what wonderful moonlight it was. Could she have gone to the window and looked out, she would have seen an immense panorama of hills and valleys, and in the middle distance a gemlike city, all bathed in radiance and making a picture which would have caused the very existence of ugliness and wrong to seem like a half-forgotten illusion.

In the morning she found that the walls of the room were indeed of stone, and the door of age-blackened oak hung upon enor-



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mous wrought-iron hinges. The furniture consisted of the bed, a table, a chair and a few trifling conveniences, all of heavy and cumbrous construction. It was with the greatest difficulty that she dragged the table over to the window, and by standing upon it succeeded in looking out. She was in the topmost cell of an immense tower. Far below lay a winding and dusty road. Beyond that a magnificent river, and across the river the turrets and ramparts of such a town as one only expects to come upon in a picture book.

Pressing her face against the window bars, she shouted with all her might. People—mere specks they were—could be seen passing on the road below, but none of them looked up. A trumpet blast could not have reached them from that height.

Then she took a handkerchief, and thrusting her arm out as far over the void as possible, waved it frantically. No one paid the least attention. It was very fatiguing, standing there on tip-toe, so finally she tied

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the handkerchief to one of the bars and sat down to think.

“Maybe the gypsy would have warned me of this if I had let her tell my fortune,” she mused. “Or maybe she was in the plot to capture me. If they are after my pearls, why don’t they take them? Father must be richer than I imagined if I’m really being held for a ransom.”

As to the fairy prince’s ignoble part in the affair, she tried to put it from her mind. Certainly there was something there which she did not understand. And having arranged her toilet as well as she could, she began to wonder when breakfast was coming.

Then she noticed a shelf upon which a meal was already set out on a tray. It differed, this shelf, from everything else in her surroundings by being flimsy and new, and examining it more closely she saw that directly above it was a horizontal slit in the wall, covered outside by a board. She could not move the board, and the slit was, besides, too narrow to offer any hopes of escape. But

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it was convenient, and evidently meant that she was not to be starved.

With forced cheerfulness, she ate what she found before her. Surely her disappearance would make a stir. If it should only prove that the fairy prince were merely pretending to have surrendered, if he should be the one to pick up the trail of her captors and come to her rescue, that would make everything more than right. In her sublime ignorance of life, she could find comfort in this possibility and forget the vast gulf upon which the window looked out.

She was on the watch when lunch time arrived, and saw the arm which pushed the second tray on the shelf. It was a man's arm—rather thin and white, with the shirt-sleeve rolled up to the elbow. Beyond that she learned nothing, for there came no response to her call. Before the dinner hour arrived, she piled the first two trays on the shelf. This forced her unseen attendant to speak to her. He did, gruffly enough, and ordered her to take the trays away if she wanted anything to eat. The arm now was



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hairy and weather-beaten. Evidently she was not in the tower with a single jailer, there was comfort in that.

The following morning she found that she had been visited during the night, for the trays were gone and the room clean and in perfect order. Also breakfast was waiting, and with it a newspaper—a Paris newspaper nearly a week old. She spent most of the day at the window, for she had discovered that—owing to the thickness of the wall and the position of the bars—it would be impossible for anyone in the road to see her handkerchief unless she held it out. Unfortunately there was no stick to serve as a flag-staff. Nothing happened to distinguish this day from its predecessor, save that once the arm which appeared through the slit was clothed in a black sleeve with a clean white cuff protruding from beneath—all having a curious, *twisted* look.

Yet another morning, and she found that her table had been taken away from the window and securely fixed to the floor with screws. She was spied upon, then, and her



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attempts to signal were known. It was a weary day, though this time a novel had been given her instead of a newspaper. Solitude was beginning to tell upon her spirits. She caught herself several times pacing the length of the floor and counting her steps—one, two, three, four, five, six—over and over again.

There was one diversion, however. She had tried the chair, and found that by standing upon its back she could still reach the window. After that she signaled regularly, but always for a very short time and only after she had covered up the slit in the wall.

She began to lose track of time and wished that she had kept account of the days from the first. The novels which continued to be given her could no longer hold her attention nor protect her from a heavy despair which was settling upon her soul. Her brain kept revolving mechanically about the question of time without arriving at any conclusion. Therefore she was uncertain how long she had been in the tower when an evening arrived bringing with it a great change in

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the bill of fare. Heretofore the food had been good but simple. This time it was quite a banquet. And among other things was a pot of steaming chocolate and a beautiful fancy cup to drink it from.

Jayne shuddered without at first knowing why. Then she remembered—the cup reminded her of Ninette's. She could not eat after that, though she was compelled to quench her thirst with a glass of water which stood on the tray beside the chocolate.

“I can never bear the sight of chocolate again,” she sobbed, as she buried her head in her pillow that night. “And yet, if they wanted to poison me they could poison the water. I could keep myself from taking the other things. But I can't help drinking when I'm thirsty.”

She felt ill when she woke, and went all day without eating. At dinner that night there was again chocolate—*and no water*.

Lepadou, parting from Niort, started for his hotel by a short-cut which led him through the ill-favored region of the rue des Grottes, and taking a wrong turning found

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himself upon the river bank. Across the stream, soft in the gathering twilight, rose Villeneuve, the tower of Philippe le Bel and the twin battlements of the fort. The scene drew him, and he was soon crossing the great modern bridge which now performs the office abandoned by the dream-ordered structure of Bénézet. He would, he decided, go and take dinner at a little inn named Le Printemps. It was a good bit of a walk, but that would give him an appetite. Also the way to Le Printemps led directly past Philippe le Bel, though of this he pretended to take no note.

Arrived at the tower's foot, however, he looked up. From the road there was nothing to be seen—aside from the great pile of masonry itself—but the steep bank, on top of which the tower stood, and several overhanging cottages, apparently uninhabited and certainly unsafe. A weed-grown path climbed the bank at a steep angle, and the detective, yielding to a desire which he could not shake off, ascended it.

As he approached, the tower seemed to



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lean towards him as if about to fall—a trick of perspective, or rather of the human eye unaccustomed to regard objects from an angle so far from the horizontal. And when, looking directly upward, he saw something within the field of vision actually begin to move, to fall, he recoiled involuntarily. It was as if all that ancient stonework meant actually to tumble on his head. Yet it was only a handkerchief.

Lepadou flung himself upon a heavy wooden door that masked the tower's entrance. To his surprise, it yielded upon its hinges without even a squeak, revealing a large circular chamber with a low-groined ceiling like the crypt of a church. In one of the great walls was the entrance to a stairway.

He mounted slowly, lighting his steps with a pocket torch. Following a perfect spiral, the stairway gave the impression of having been gnawed by some huge worm out of the solid rock. There were no windows, no ornaments, nothing even to serve as a hand-hold—nothing anywhere but smooth, close-fitting



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granite blocks. No wonder the tower had stood for centuries and needed no caretaker. It was built like the eternal hills.

At the top, where he arrived breathless from the climb, there was no landing—only a wall built sheer up from the last step. In this wall was a door, and some other sort of aperture covered with a wooden blind. As the blind was hinged and fastened only with a simple catch, he tried this first and found himself looking through a horizontal slit into a dim room, within which moved the figure of a girl.

“Jayne!” he called softly. “Jayne Boncoeur, can it really be you?”

She turned, then started back in terror.

“Don’t be afraid,” he begged.

“Afraid? You’re trying to starve me, to poison me.”

“No, no.”

“Yes, you are. Take away your chocolate cups and give me some water.”

“But, Jayne, if anyone is trying to harm you, it is somebody else. I’m one of the officers who are out hunting for you. And

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just now, as I was passing, you dropped your handkerchief. That's what led me here. Look!"

She took the handkerchief, which he extended through the opening, but seemed only partially reassured.

"If you're a friend," she said, "come back and let me out."

"I'll let you out now."

"You can't. I'm locked in and the door is very thick."

"Very rotten, too," pronounced Lepadou, after a hurried examination. "I think I can kick it down. If not, I'll go and get something in the way of a crowbar."

"You must be very careful if you do," said the girl, coming close to the opening. "There are three men here. I haven't seen any of them for several hours, but they're apt to be back any minute. And one of them isn't a man, he's a devil. He laughs and he has crooked arms."

Lepadou waited to hear no more, but lifted his boot-heel and brought it smartly down

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upon what appeared to be the weakest spot in the door planking.

At the same instant, the step beneath him seemed to turn over. It threw him headlong down the precipitous spiral of the stairs—headlong and into darkness, for he had dropped his torch.

## CHAPTER XVI

### TARDIEU'S PARTY

WHEN the journalists of Paris finally began to suspect that the whereabouts of Pierre Noyeau were unknown, they became unmanageable. Boncoeur's suicide, coming as the third of a series of already sufficiently *beaux crimes* had been bad enough, notwithstanding a letter found among the deceased's papers and speaking vaguely of a "life-long remorse," which put the nature of the deed beyond a doubt. And his will, dated years before and leaving nearly all his property to his younger daughter, merely increased the talk. It was but natural, therefore, that the disappearance of his intended son-in-law should arouse the press to a fury of excitement. The idea that he might be away playing detective on the trail of Jayne was scoffed at as an official invention designed to hide



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incompetence. Public opinion demanded an arrest.

Great was the surprise and indignation in police circles, therefore, when only the most perfunctory steps continued to be taken. At *la Sûreté* in particular, where the *brigade special* would ordinarily have been put in charge, astonishment reigned. For in so far as it could be ascertained, the only ones who were busying themselves with this extraordinary affair were *Juge d'Instruction* Tardieu, *Commissaire* Boussai, and a mere *inspecteur du commissariat* named Forgeron.

A few suspected that Lepadou was still in favor, and that all hands were being stayed in order to give the famous sleuth a free field. But these few were so highly placed that their gossip never reached the rank and file.

Suddenly all was changed. It began, some said, with the arrest of a street arab. At any rate a very ragged boy was seen passing under guard into the *Chef de la Sûreté's* private office, though whether he was an actual prisoner or not remained conjectural. Certainly things began to move.

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Even then it was not to the *brigade special*, or “homicide squad,” but to the *brigade de la voie publique* that orders were given—men whose ordinary business it was to patrol the streets in citizen’s clothes, ready to follow, *à la flan* (at hazard), any known criminals they might encounter. The brigadier of this squad, after an interview with his chief, reappeared in company with the mysterious boy, but was gone again before a word could be said—taking the boy with him.

A few hours afterwards two women were brought in—one a hag in a sort of gypsy get-up, the other much younger and somewhat too ostentatiously fine. Yet their names were entered upon no register, and what became of them not even the chief inspectors could say.

Then word was openly given to the whole brigade to go out and look for Pierre Noyeau. He was located almost immediately, locked in the cellar of an unused warehouse. His clothes were torn and dirty, and he had worked himself into a state bordering on frenzy in his vain efforts to get out. But if

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he had any statement to make he reserved it for ears more discreet than those of the men who rescued him and took him to their chief.

This same day, Boussai, who had converted the Boncoeur house into a mouse-trap (a place under secret surveillance, arranged for the capture of all suspects who may enter it), received a special message from the *juge d'instruction*.

*“Kindly have all parties connected with the Boncoeur affair assembled in the room of the deceased Ninette at nine o’clock this evening. I think it would be a good idea to hold an enquête on the scene of the crime.”*

The *commissaire*, who had just returned from a few days’ leave, took the letter to Forgeron, whom he found smoking a lonely pipe in the lodge of the Boncoeur’s concierge.

“You see one can’t turn his back on this affair even long enough to get a much-needed breath of air,” he observed with considerable irritation when the other had spelled the message out carefully to the last line. “Be prepared to hear Tardieu express both sur-



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prise and indignation if we haven't at least one murderer ready for him."

Forgeron murmured an assent, and hurried to make a round of the house for the purpose of informing its three remaining inhabitants that their presence would be required at this new inquiry.

Charlotte received the news indifferently; Madame Boncoeur with a wordless stare. Only Mrs. Cuit presumed to demand an explanation. But even she lacked the belligerency which she would once have shown under the circumstances, and Forgeron answered mechanically:

"It's just a fool order—nothing to cry about."

"Isn't it true, then, that M'sieu Noyeau has been found dead, and that we're all to be tried for his murder?"

"Of course not. Noyeau is away somewhere trying to locate Jayne. How do you hear such ridiculous stories?"

He sought solitude in Jayne's room, where he sat for a long time gazing out absently through the closed shutters. It was thus



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that he happened to see a boy stopped and quietly led away by an apparently private citizen while attempting to cross the quai.

“That was a pinch,” muttered the inspector, as something professional in the hold of the citizen upon the urchin’s sleeve caught his eye. “The fellow is a *flic*, and I think I know the boy, too. He ain’t the one we used to see hangin’ around here. I’ve heard the other *gamins* call him François.”

“I suppose you haven’t been able to get anything further out of Madame Boncoeur or the servants?” said Boussai, putting in his head at the door.

“No, *m’sieu le commissaire*, I——”

“Try once more, if nothing else turns up. We must arrest *somebody* or the judge will be blaming *us*.”

The inspector acknowledged the likelihood of this, and was back in the lodge when—for the first time in weeks—a strange voice demanded entrance. To pull the cord which unlocked the gate was the work of an instant.

“One would think it was the middle of the night,” complained the stranger. “What’s

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the idea of keeping your court-yard closed in the afternoon?"

Forgeron waited until a sharp click told him that the gate had relocked itself automatically. Then he looked out of his wicket at the well-dressed young man who confronted him.

"Where do you come from if you don't know that?" he demanded.

"You may well ask where I come from. But I want to see Madame Boncoeur."

"Your name, please."

"My name is Benson, and——"

Forgeron stepped out into the court.

"I arrest you in the name of the law," he said, snapping a pair of handcuffs adroitly about the visitor's wrists.

"You've done some good work, at last," admitted Boussai, when he arrived that evening and had viewed the prisoner. "Has he made a statement?"

"Not a word since I put the *menottes* on him. But your orders were——"

"It's all right, Forgeron. You have made

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no mistake. And let the judge come now, if he wants to.”

When the judge finally put in an appearance, however, there was that in his manner which seemed to indicate that all human activities, even including the arrest of stray gentlemen demanding admittance to mouse-traps, were things too absurd and trivial to be taken seriously. Tardieu had often been accused of being too much of a philosopher and a humorist. He was at his worst. He wore a flower in his button-hole.

“More chairs! More chairs!” he bustled, making his way to Ninette’s room. “Never mind the prisoner. No doubt he feels quite bad enough for the present, and it will be easy to make him feel worse later on. But good heavens, my dear confrères! I’m expecting quite a party to-night. You wouldn’t have my guests kept standing, would you? Some of them are ladies.”

Moving with the stiffness of automatons, Boussai and Forgeron provided the required furniture. The magistrate’s flippancy was beginning to look like a cloak. He was, in

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fact, so ill at ease that when his own *greffier* entered with a lot of documents and writing materials, he was unable to avoid a start.

“I wonder what’s in the wind?” Boussai went so far as to whisper to his subordinate. “I never saw him so bad as this.”

Forgeron shook his head, and went about his duties as if the judge’s lapse from the decorum of criminal procedure had thrown him into a trance. Without a word he helped Madame Boncoeur, Charlotte and Mrs. Cuit to their places, at the same time permitting the prisoner to slip behind a screen in the corner—less out of consideration than because his attention had suddenly become fixed on Madame Boncoeur. She looked more sallow, more like a female Buddha than ever, and had covered her lap with a steamer rug, as if the season were winter. She was even hiding her hands. What could ail her? A chill?

When Lepadou fell through the darkness of the tower, it was not, as he feared for several instants, either to break his neck or to land in the hands of the enemy. The top



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step had been cleverly fixed on a pivot, so that when he put his weight on its outer edge it had turned beneath him. But all that he suffered was a few severe bruises. An hour later, he and Jayne were at the station, and the tower under secret observation by the Avignon police.

At Paris, his first act was to seek out Judge Tardieu and demand another look at the famous snap-shot.

“Only thirteen pieces!” he exclaimed as he bent over it. “I might have known.”

Getting in touch with Le Squelette, he was able to round out his information still further—for the boy had been far from idle—and to set on foot those official activities already noted. And now he entered the room where the judge’s little party was beginning to assemble, apparently totally unaware of the exclamations which greeted his appearance.

After him came Jayne; then a gypsy with her head wrapped in a shawl; then a woman closely veiled.

“I believe we are ready to begin,” said the

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*juge d'instruction*, speaking with evident agitation from his seat by the *greffier* behind a table.

“Your Honor,” Lepadou responded, “there is one important witness whom I’ve been unable to locate. He was supposed to be among those out looking for Jayne Boncoeur, but I——”

“If you had seen fit to take me into your confidence instead of pretending to be in disgrace,” the *commissaire* interrupted. “I think I could have saved you trouble.”

Boussai moved aside the screen, and continued:

“Here, *m’sieu le juge*, is the missing witness—by name, Laurent Bienson, *Comte de Montfayat*, alias Lawrence Benson. He has been sought for a long time, but to-day was caught while attempting to communicate with Madame Boncoeur. And I now charge him with the murder of Ninette Amelle, commonly called Boncoeur, and with the subsequent abduction of Jayne Boncoeur, her reputed sister.”

Jayne broke into sobs and hid her face in

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her hands, while for the first time there were signs of life from the moveless invalid in her wheeled chair. Lepadou showed both surprise and chagrin.

“If I had dreamed of this,” he began.

But the judge cut him short.

“He’s merely caught your man for you—no great harm done.”

“I would like to say,” put in the prisoner, opening his mouth at last, “that I called on Madame Boncoeur only to see if she hadn’t possibly some private information concerning her missing daughter, who—thank God—is here at last. I’d been conducting some unsuccessful investigations of my own, and could no longer endure the suspense. My visit here should implicate nobody but myself.”

“If I were you I’d save my statements till later,” suggested Tardieu. “I’ve agreed to conduct this investigation in the quaint American manner, which gives the defendant a chance to hear what is said against him before he need reply. Proceed, *m’sieu le commissaire*.”

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“I shall be brief,” promised Boussai. “Jayne Boncoeur, under what circumstances did you leave Paris?”

Falteringly, the girl confessed to her appointment with the accused, explained how she had met a strange man who promised to take her to him, and briefly described her subsequent forced flight in the limousine and the roadside hold-up.

“Did you see anybody in the first machine whom you recognized?”

“I thought I did.”

“Whom did you see?”

“Tell the truth,” prompted Lepadou, as the witness hesitated.

“I thought it was M’sieu Benson. But he never came near me.”

“And it was Benson who surrendered in the hold-up?”

“It looked like him.”

“I ask you to swear that you knew it was he.”

“I won’t. It was a dark night, and I—it may have been——”

“I see why you are letting me conduct this



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examination, *m'sieu le juge*. It is a very painful case, and nobody can blame the young lady for trying to shield the man who was her lover. But I want to ask her if she didn't present her sister with a box of *marrons glacés* the night before she died?"

"Yes," Jayne admitted, after a glance at Lepadou.

"And you removed them from your sister's room the next morning when you thought nobody was looking?"

"Who—who saw me? You hadn't come yet."

"Never mind. You did it. Were any of them missing?"

"A few—but there was no poison in the marrons."

"How do you know?"

"I ate what was left."

Boussai shook his head.

"You didn't eat the originals, my poor child, for I took them while you were out warning your lover to keep away from the house. What you ate were harmless substi-

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tutes. The originals are here, and contain enough cyanide to kill an army."

There was an immense sensation as he produced a box, laid it on the judge's table, and continued:

"*Vraiment*, in this affair of Ninette Boncoeur we find ourselves face to face with the bizarre. Here was a young girl, beautiful, rich, pampered by her parents, engaged to marry her father's *contremaître* and openly in love with him. She appeared to have every chance of happiness.

"But appearances are not to be trusted, and every one of these seeming facts was a lie. She was a woman, not a girl. She did not belong even distantly to the family which posed her as its eldest daughter. Her name was not mentioned in her supposed father's will. The indulgences with which her pretended mother surrounded her, instead of being prompted by foolish love, were the result of a jealous hatred of astounding proportions and intended to lead to her ruin."

The *commissaire* proceeded to recount all the circumstances which Lepadou, believing

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himself to be a discoverer, had wormed out of the records—Ninette's desertion by L'Alouette; her quasi-adoption by the singer's wardrobe-woman; L'Alouette's marriage to the Count de Montfayat; the count's death, which left the widow in command of his fortune; and finally the girl's visit to her real mother in Avignon.

“The plan,” he continued, “was to ruin Ninette in the eyes of the countess. For who was so likely to have become Puritanical as an old Bohemian, a parvenue in the ranks of the aristocracy? In no other way can be understood the utter neglect of the most ordinary moral precautions in Ninette's bringing up. Jayne was guarded almost like a prisoner to protect her from the contamination of this régime. The other was fairly shoved along the primrose path.

“But Pierre Noyeau insisted on preferring the supposed eldest daughter, and Madame Boncoeur was too fond of him to offer serious opposition. If Ninette could be made to disgrace herself, the match could be broken off, and Jayne would then not only

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inherit both fortunes, but get the husband as well."

"Are you going to prefer charges against Madame Boncoeur?" put in the judge.

"I charge her with nothing excepting blind jealousy in favor of her own offspring and failure to carry out the spirit as well as the letter of an arrangement. Nor do I wish to insinuate that Jayne, Ninette, or even Boncoeur were anything but innocent tools in her hands. Boncoeur knew what he was doing, but he showed his repentance by hanging himself."

"Would you mind telling me how you discovered these things?" demanded Lepadou, "and just how and why you claim that Benson tried to poison Ninette—the betrothed of another man?"

"He did not *try* to poison her," Boussai quietly corrected. "He succeeded—and by the simple expedient of handing her sister a box of sweetmeats and asking to have them delivered. As to how I discovered the facts, I learned some of them by having a boy named François follow a boy called Le



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Squelette, and then shadowing Le Squellette's master. The next time you wish to work on a case secretly, my dear Lepadou, you should change your deputies as well as your features—though I suppose Le Squellette is really too clever to be laid aside. He also made a substitution of the marrons, though unfortunately too late to be of service.”

At this point, the rage and mortification apparent in Lepadou's face became painful to see. A momentary silence was broken only by the sobbing of Jayne and a futile attempt on the part of Benson to communicate with her across the barrier interposed by the huge bulk of Forgeron. And then Boussai resumed his recital, with nothing either in his voice or in the expressions of his hearers which gave any hint of the strange events which the evening was still to bring forth.

“Let me remind you,” he went on, addressing the judge, “that Benson is the disinherited son of the late count, by the count's first wife. This is the root of the whole mat-

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ter. For, on hearing of his father's death, he returned from America, where he had been living, and attempted to win the good will of the widowed countess, his step-mother. Here he found a barrier—this natural daughter, to whom she intended to leave the fortune.

“His moral claim seems not to have been altogether ignored, and there is evidence to show that on Ninette's visit to Avignon the countess attempted to make a marriage between the two claimants to the estate. Ninette, happy in other plans—even, let us admit, irrevocably committed to other plans—refused to agree to it, and hurried back to Paris. Benson followed her, fell in with her sister, and sent her the poisoned candy so that she might no longer stand in his way.”

“You also accuse him of Jayne's abduction,” suggested the judge.

Boussai inclined his head.

“I am coming to that, and also to the part he must have played in the disappearance of Pierre Noyeau. But first I want to call attention to the fact that Ninette was no sooner

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dead than Benson began to search among the public records for the Boncoeur antecedents. He knew that Ninette was illegitimate, and possibly he wanted to be certain in regard to Jayne. For Jayne had conceived a girlish passion for him, and he meant to take advantage of it."

"Why didn't he plan simply to marry her?"

"Because, *m'sieu le juge*, here again he couldn't win the lady's consent. Every day her infatuation seemed to wane. She was gradually inclining, I think, towards Pierre Noyeau, whose merits could not fail to impress her now that the removal of Ninette had made him a possible husband. Something spectacular and romantic was necessary. Benson decided on an abduction.

"It is my opinion that he intended it at first to be an ordinary abduction. Then he saw how much safer it would be if he won her heart. So he changed his mind at the last minute, and went through the farce of having his hirelings hold him up. In due time I shall produce a witness to the scene.



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What was his plan now? I can only guess. But you will notice that Jayne Boncoeur has testified that he never came near her. That would seem as if he were giving himself a chance to pretend that he was never there, and afterwards, when her reputation had been ruined and her spirit thoroughly broken, to appear before her suddenly as a successful amateur detective, a magnanimous hero, ready to marry her in spite of all.

“But M’sieu Lepadou seems to have forestalled him in this. No doubt he can give you further details.”

“Maybe I can,” snapped Lepadou, before anyone else could get in a word. “Will somebody kindly call Pierre Noyeau in from the hall?”

A uniformed *guardian de le paix*, who had been leaning nonchalantly against the outer door, hastened to obey the detective’s order. The woman by the gypsy’s side lifted her veil, revealing a face of insipid if somewhat outworn prettiness marred by the excessive use of rouge. Forgeron moved restlessly in his chair. He had a feeling that something



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long suspended in the air—something in the nature of a sword held by a hair—were about to fall.

At the same time, an all-seeing eye, could it have looked into the room, would have observed a hand stealing into a side pocket and laying hold of the grip of an automatic pistol.

“The *commissaire* has made it unnecessary for me to say much,” Lepadou went on. “But I want to ask M’sieu Noyeau where he has spent the last few days?”

“I was lured into an unused building by a message purporting to come from an old friend,” Noyeau responded. “There I was set upon by a band of toughs—some of them very young ones. They locked me in a cellar and kept me on scant rations till I was rescued by the police.”

The questioner, unable to hide a smile, pointed to the unveiled woman.

“Is this the friend?”

“Yes, sir. And if I have given her any reason to complain of me—*mon Dieu*, but she has made the most of it.”

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“True. I took her for a vindictive person when I first met her—in the Bois de Boulogne. But you must give my over-zealous ragamuffin—who entered into the conspiracy to lay you by the heels—also the credit for piloting the rescue party. Have you ever seen the accused before—the gentleman sitting by the screen?”

“Once. Shortly after Ninette’s funeral I was out walking with Jayne, and he approached us—impertinently, I thought.”

“Seemed to be interested in her?”

“He did.”

Two gamins were brought in.

“Le Squelette,” said the detective, “do you know this boy, who calls himself François?”

“I’ll say I do, boss.”

“Well, it’s a pity you didn’t get acquainted with him sooner. And what do you say to the idea that the marrons you took from Jayne’s room were some that had already been substituted for the originals?”

“Aw, how could dat be? Didn’t de ones I took have L’Alouette’s old play-bill stick-

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in' to 'em? An' you've just been tellin' me yerself dat de bill was Ninette's an' given 'er by 'er mother."

"True enough. There's a mystery here somewhere. I'll ask the Countess of Montfayat if she *did* give the play-bill to her daughter."

The gypsy threw aside her threadbare shawl and stood up—a fine old woman, elegantly, even gorgeously dressed, and showing no gypsy trait whatever.

"Good evening to you, Judge Tardieu," she said, with a courtesy which could have been learned nowhere but on the stage. "I see you've been warned to expect me. Now don't begin to take on. Bygones are bygones, and I don't want to be flustered before I answer this young man's question. I did give my Ninette the old program you showed me, M'sieu Lepadou. She wanted a souvenir of her mother, only recently having learned who her mother was, poor dear!

"I wanted her to marry my scapegrace stepson, just as the other gentleman has said. They were not related—I don't care who

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knows it now. And it seemed a pity to let the money go out of the family. But Ninette was in love with her fiancé—thanks to no doings of mine, either. I never wanted that match. My! How often I've come prowling around here dressed up as an old apple woman, trying to find out if she was happy. That's how much of a *Puritan* I was. It was too late to make myself known, or at least I thought so. I didn't believe then that Ninette would forgive me if she knew. And Le Glaçon over there, who put the idea into my head, wouldn't let me see her. She wanted Noyeau to feather his nest, that's my opinion, and get Ninette out of the way of her Jayne.

“And now my girl is dead, and my scapegrace is accused of murdering her. I wish I'd never lived to see this day, though it is good, judge, to be able to have a look at old friends such as you again.”

L'Alouette sat down, half crying, half smiling. Her voice, which during the excitement of her narrative had recovered some of



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the thrilling smoothness which art had once given it, broke on the last word.

During the hush which followed, Lepadou paced once or twice up and down the room, lost in thought, with his hands behind him. As he did so he felt himself shiver, as if he had encountered a draught of cold air. He could have sworn that he had passed in front of something horrible, which he perceived through some part of his being more sensitive than his mind. And yet, glancing covertly around the circle, he could see nothing amiss. Cursing himself inwardly for a fool, he gave an order.

“Bring in the Apaches.”

Four figures entered, and so true had been the detective's instinct that—save for the care with which it was concealed—he and the whole company might have seen a pistol-barrel slowly lifted till it pointed straight as the finger of death towards its unsuspected and unsuspecting mark.

“La Haquenée, Le Tapageur, Le Boquetin, Le Boucher,” said Lepadou, introducing the new witnesses to the judge, “caught by

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the Avignon police as they were returning to their quarters in the tower of Philippe le Bel after a most untimely little spree. No doubt you are acquainted with them, Your Honour, though Le Tapageur has consented, just to please me, to appear in a rather uncharacteristic make-up."

"That is he!" cried Jayne. "It is the very man I took for M'sieu Benson in the automobile. And the pale one next him—La Haquenée—is the one who rode with me."

"Very good. I thought I would surprise you. But Forgeron, what is the trouble with *you*?"

"I—it's nothing. I'm seein' things, that's all."

"Seeing things?"

"I—I was took dizzy for a minute there. It made my head swim."

Lepadou regarded the inspector doubtfully, but ended by going on with the case.

"The *commissaire* has in many particulars merely confirmed what I already knew or suspected. Yet everybody must have noticed how the picture of the crime as formed

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in his own mind seemed to be undergoing a strange sort of alteration with each witness that I have called—how its details, instead of remaining fixed or dropping out of the pattern, were slowly arranging themselves into a different pattern.

“For instance, while it is true that Jayne saw her lover, as she supposed, in the automobile, it seems no longer true that he was there. Someone undoubtedly intended to rescue the girl from pretended bandits, and would have done so if he had had the chance, only M’sieu Boussai has made a mistake as to that person’s identity. And these marrons on the table here are unquestionably full of cyanide—but you are beginning to doubt if they are the originals. In fact, as I shall show presently, both the *commissaire* and Le Squelette were deceived. Neither got hold of the originals, which were, however, quite harmless, as Ninette was not poisoned by marrons at all.

“There was a man, too, who searched the public records. But he did not discover that Ninette was the daughter of the Countess of



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Montfayat. He merely found out that she was not a Boncoeur. This is immensely important, and until I thought of it as a possibility I was entirely at a loss as to the motive for the crime. But before explaining further I wish to go back.

“When I first undertook this case, I believed that I was on track of one of the most ingenious minds of the age—of a criminal who is a sort of superstition with me rather than a proved fact—a man, or perhaps only an imagined man, whom I have nicknamed The Squid, because it sometimes seems as if his tentacles reached everywhere.

“Then I discovered that the pieces of the cup found by Ninette’s bedside were too numerous by one, according to an idea I had formed of The Squid’s method. I decided to give up the investigation and watch for signs of my party’s activity in some other direction. But almost immediately a bullet flying out of nowhere nearly laid me low. This looked like my man again, and I decided to go on.

“I had become fanciful by this time, and



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several little incidents encouraged me in the belief that I was on the long-sought trail. It was not till after I had arrived in Avignon that I was again assailed by a serious doubt. One of the characteristics of The Squid, as he existed in my imagination, was that he never made a mistake. On going to the rescue of Jayne I suffered from an ingeniously contrived 'accident,' and was rendered momentarily helpless. But I wasn't set upon and killed. This looked like a mistake. It couldn't, I thought, be The Squid after all.

"But I had gone too far with the case to drop it, and so came back to Paris, where I took pains to study a photograph taken of this very room immediately after the murder was discovered. I had examined the picture before, but carelessly, supposing that it would agree with the inventory. This time I looked closer and found that it did not agree. It showed the cup incomplete. There had been a piece missing when the photograph was taken, though previously, at the time of the inventory, and later, when the cup was finally sent to the chemist, every

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piece was there. My belief in The Squid theory revived."

"Does it exist still?" asked Boussai.

Lepadou responded in the negative.

"In spite of what I may describe as the persistence of certain shivers of premonition, which I have occasionally been so weak as to take for evidence of that monster's nearness, I must confess that again my theory is on the wane. For I have discovered other mistakes—one quite fatal. My arch-criminal could never have been guilty of that. So I'm afraid we have to do here with a mere imitator, with someone who has heard, perhaps, of the real Squid's methods and attempted to duplicate them.

"One of these mistakes was the hoax of the poisoned candy. Jayne receives the box from Benson—a box of quite innocuous marrons, which reached Ninette by the merest accident. The *commissaire* finds them in Jayne's room while Jayne is out—that is, he thinks he finds them. In reality our imitation master-criminal has already tried to take advantage of the accident by

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planting substituted, poisoned sweets for the purpose of having them found. The *commissaire* makes another substitution, and waits for developments. At midnight, Le Squelette comes along, and, at the risk of being taken for a burglar, goes through the performance once more. It is comic, this same expedient repeated over and over again. But nobody changed the box, and L'Alouette's play-bill stuck to the original lid till Le Squelette arrived, when it seems to have let go its hold on purpose to deceive us with the idea that he has the very marrons he is looking for.

“The Squid would never have taken such clumsy advantage of an accident. He would never have been so foolish as to suppose that I would believe in murder by poisoned candy given to the wrong person and reaching the right one by sheer hazard, especially when there existed evidence that Ninette was killed by quite other means. But the greatest mistake of all was this—the man who searched the records left irrefutable indications of his identity behind him.



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“Was this man Benson? In Avignon I was continually coming upon inexplicable enigmas because I was attempting to fit Benson to the crime. It is the same here. What could Benson have learned from the records? Probably nothing which he did not know already from the countess, his stepmother. If he had searched them, what would he have found out? *Everything*—that Ninette was the child of the countess, that Jayne was sole heiress of the Boncoeurs. In other words, that either girl was a good match. No motive for murder here.

“The *commissaire* supposes that the search took place after Ninette's death, and that Benson's motive was to make certain that Jayne was legitimate. This is very thin. Legitimate or not, Boncoeur had nobody else, then, to leave his money to.

“But suppose it was not Benson? Say it was somebody who did not know that L'Alouette's maiden name was Amelle or that she married the count. He would have found nothing in the records to enlighten him and would have jumped to the conclu-



## THE BONCOEUR AFFAIR

sion that Ninette, not being recorded as a Boncoeur, was a nameless waif. Without the name of Amelle he would have found no reference to her at all; and even with it he could not have traced any connection between the girl and the Montfayat fortune, for the simple reason that the Montfayat marriage is not recorded in Paris.

“Let us say further that this took place many months ago, and that the searcher was even then bound to the supposed waif. There immediately arises a motive for his wanting to get rid of her.

“And he *was* bound, Your Honor. He was the openly accepted suitor for her hand. Not content with that, he had taken scandalous means to make sure that the engagement should not be broken off even if her father, never enthusiastic in regard to it, should become positively hostile.

“What sent him suddenly to searching records? Perhaps it was some story which had reached his ears. Perhaps he had managed to get a look at Boncoeur’s will, so strangely in favor of the younger daughter.

## TARDIEU'S PARTY

And having found out half of the truth he makes an appointment with his betrothed to meet him at St. Cloud.

“It was not the first time. But this time he is careful to keep away from the rendezvous, and to show himself elsewhere. Ninette loses the last boat home while waiting for him, and is away all night. The incident, though not her name, gets into the newspapers and she preserves one of the clippings.

“Do you see the cold-blooded ruthlessness of the scheme? She could not openly charge him with having made the appointment without exposing the fact that her relations with her *fiancé* were no longer above criticism. So she said nothing, hoping that if she did not anger him a speedy marriage would hide all her indiscretions. But she could not explain her absence to her parents. Here was a flaw in her reputation—and he meant to use it as a loop-hole.

“But for a time he must have contented himself with finding pretexts for the postponement of the wedding. Then all at once

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he seems to have become eager for it. Ninette was notoriously happy during the last few weeks of her life. When the *commis-saire*—for a blind, no doubt—announced his belief in the suicide theory—the first objection to it was this recent happiness of the deceased. The lover had abandoned the notion of simply repudiating his victim, and chosen a worse one. Why?

“I think it probable that a published account of The Squid’s crimes in America—a hint of that method of which I will have more to say later—had come under his eyes. Here, he reasoned, was a simple and safe technic for taking human life. There was danger in repudiation. The girl, forced to tell her story, might be believed. Unexpected witnesses might turn up to corroborate it. And he had just the sort of shrewdness which thinks it can plan a murder which will not out.

“But, unfortunately for him, he made his trail plain from the start. He used a fountain pen in taking notes from the records, and got ink on his fingers. Look at this.”

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Lepadou lifted a document from the judge's table, and pointed to an ink-smudge in the corner.

“This is his thumb-print. It will be his death-warrant. Pierre Noyeau, I challenge you to put your own thumb——”

But the detective got no further. The lights of the chamber went out. There was a crashing pistol shot.



## CHAPTER XVII

### THE TRAIL OF THE SQUID

***E**XTRACT from a letter written by  
"Ferret" McClue to his assistant,  
Clara Hope, in New York:*

I shall never overrate an opponent again. It's as bad as the other way around. For, of course, you see how this is going to end. No doubt that school-teacher brain of yours has even divined that I am no smarter when I disguise myself as a Frenchman and call myself Lepadou than when I stay at home and try—to get you to hurry up our wedding day, for example. The fact is, it doesn't take a person incapable of making mistakes to get the better of me, and I was wrong in supposing it did.

But who knows, after all, if The Squid actually made any mistakes? I'll get him now, but really I wouldn't be surprised if it

## THE TRAIL OF THE SQUID

turned out that he's merely been more subtle than I, and that what I'm taking for slips proved eventually to have been strokes of genius in disguise. Even that flaw in his infernal instrument of death—the necessity of removing one of the pieces, at least long enough to clean it—may only mean that he likes the thrill of being the hunted as well as the hunter.

The thumb-mark, observe, was not The Squid's fault—that happened before he had taken a hand, and his allowing his tool to go on believing in a half truth was a wonderful piece of villainy, I think. As for my escape in the tower, who knows that the scoundrel *wants* me dead, or that thus far I've been doing anything more than furnish him with a part of his mental excitement? Inventing a witness, so as to hide his own guilty knowledge of the hold-up, was clever, too, as it gave him time, and a witness could easily have been arranged for if the game had lasted. His worst play, if he did trip, was in trying to fool me with those poisoned marrons—that, or failing to discover that

## THE BONCOEUR AFFAIR

Jayne was ready to elope, and so allowing himself to launch the absurd theory that Benson meant to abduct her.

And on my side, didn't I fail to follow up the clue furnished by the extraordinary taste shown in Ninette's room? I felt it from the first, and should have known that it meant an artistic heredity.

Of course, when I found Jayne under restraint in the tower, I knew at once that Benson wasn't the culprit. He had a motive for eloping with her and for wanting to make her his wife. But one doesn't cage a willing prisoner. And when she mentioned that a man with crooked arms had attempted to serve her with chocolate in a fancy cup, I knew that the real Squid had at last appeared upon the scene. Neither Benson nor Noyeau had any reason for wanting to *kill* the girl. But instead of seeing that it was the real Squid throughout, I remained hipped by the fourteen pieces in Forgeron's inventory, and adopted the ridiculous notion that Marle had thrust himself into the plot, uninvited and unknown, only after Jayne's



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trip to Avignon had put her in his power. Notwithstanding the lack of watchers and my own escape on the stairs, I couldn't get it into my head that he could at least *seem* to be stupid and loved to play with us like a cat with a mouse.

It required a lot of false reasoning to arrive at the conclusion that Ninette was murdered and Jayne abducted by an imitation Squid, but I achieved that marvel of logic. And as Noyeau clearly had a motive for taking Jayne, whether by fair means or foul, I promptly cast him for the imitator's part. Not even when I studied the snapshot and found that it didn't agree with the inventory did it begin to dawn on me that there was no imitator, but merely a tool, and that in the end the master had simply overreached and supplanted his pupil. There is some mystery about that photograph yet. I can't help feeling that it was taken before its intended time—by accident, perhaps.

*But I'm going to get my man*, no matter if he turns out to be as incapable of error as the multiplication table. Should the office



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get a little lonesome and no problems come in sufficiently intricate to keep you cheerful, just you focus upon that. For it means, I hope, that I'll soon be home with a big feather in my cap. And now for the rest of the story, without which, I am afraid, the foregoing is anything but crystal clear.

You can imagine the confusion when total darkness and the roar which a shot makes in a confined room both struck our senses at the same time. We simply fought our way to the electric switch, upsetting furniture, and taking everybody we touched for an assassin. And when the switch was found, of course it wouldn't work. Candles had to be brought in. I think it was the maid, Charlotte, who first had the sense to see that. Anyway it was she who went and got them—after I, happening to catch her at the door, had made a sufficient fuss about her going out.

With light came quiet—a sudden and quite dreadful quiet. There sat—whom do you suppose? Pierre Noyeau, of course, in his chair just where he had been, but stone

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dead now and shot through the heart. For an instant I didn't know what it meant.

"It's my fault," Forgeron began to shout. "I saw the crooked arm, and wouldn't believe my eyes."

This didn't help matters, for it sounded as if the big fellow, whom I'd caught in suspicious situations before, was trying to feign insanity.

"Let nobody go out, we must search for that pistol," cried the judge, showing more energy than I would have expected of him in a pinch. And almost immediately we heard the answer, "Here it is," coming from the *guardian de la paix*, the only cop among us who wore a uniform. He had gone right to Le Glaçon, if you please, and was trying to get possession of a very ugly little pistol that she'd been hiding under the rug that covered her lap.

But her fingers seemed glued to the butt, and when we finally succeeded in prying them loose it was to find that the barrel was clean and cold, and every chamber still loaded. I discovered afterwards that For-

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geron had learned some damning things about her, and I fancy she came prepared to follow her husband if any of this evidence came out. But she didn't say a word, and it was soon evident that she would never talk again. She'd had another stroke—a pretty complete one this time.

Grisly? I tell you, Clara, it was worse than that time when we came upon the scarlet X on Kulisan, or when we were poking about that ghostly old house in Connecticut, following the clew of the primrose petal. But do you know what it made me think of? That morning in San Francisco which was to have been our wedding day, and the motor truck struck our cab just when I was expecting that another minute would bring us to the license office. As you lay there, cold and insensible in my arms, you wore for a while just that awful look of eternal peace which was settling over the face of Madame Boncoeur.

But it wasn't a time to think about the past, and the *guardian de la paix*, still hold-

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ing that obviously unused pistol in his hand, was getting impatient.

“It must have been somebody else,” he jabbered. “The *commissaire* is out looking for him. Oughtn’t we to be helping?”

“My dear man,” I put in, “we were sitting with the doors shut and the windows down. And you will notice that the *commissaire* is the only person who was here then who isn’t here now.”

Until that minute, I don’t believe that anybody realized the significance of this fact or even the fact itself.

“It couldn’t have been *Boussai* who fired the shot!” exclaimed Tardieu, with the countess—now in hysterics—clinging to his arm in a way that threw a flood of light on *their* secret.

“No,” I responded—for it came to me now in a flash, “*Boussai* has probably been dead for months. How long ago was it since he was last absent from Paris for any length of time?”

“He was in Tunis for his health quite a



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while,” put in Forgeron. “Came back last October.”

“Did you notice anything altered about him?”

“His voice, maybe. He said he’d had some disease of the throat. But he never did much talking.”

“He’s been dead, then, for at least six months,” I went on. “The man who came back in his place was a fellow named Marle—The Squid, as I call him. He’d learned enough of the *commissaire’s* life and habits to impersonate him—not as difficult a feat as it looks. Boussai was always aloof in his ways, I gather. You remember, Judge, the Tichborne claimant in England? For sheer acting that was a much more remarkable case.”

And I went on to tell how many men I’d followed, thinking them to be The Squid—how they’d always disappeared, or turned out to be honest citizens. I was excited, for I saw that I’d discovered Marle’s great secret. He doesn’t disguise himself merely, he impersonates. Isn’t it wonderful, Clara?

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Simple, too. For the world is made up of only a few different types of men, and it's much easier to suggest another of your own type—or of a different one, for that matter—than to create an entirely new character.

But I couldn't convince the judge—not all at once. The idea was too new. When he finally saw the truth of it he became more excited than I, and began to boil over in the regular French manner.

“We must get out after him,” he declared, “and not stand here doing nothing.”

“It's too late,” said I. “The *guardian de la paix* has already gone to raise the hue and cry. But nothing will come of it.”

“Are we to remain idle, then?”

“For the moment yes. Surely, Your Honor, you understand that what happened to-night was planned—a foreseen possibility, with the getaway all ready. He had Noyeau covered with his pistol for half an hour.”

“How do you know?”

“I *felt* it when I happened to pass in front of it in the middle of the hearing. I'd felt

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it before. But this time it didn't seem to be pointed intentionally at me. I seemed to pass in and out of a zone of danger—it didn't follow me around. You see, I was no longer alone in the Boncoeur affair. I'd had a chance to talk with you, and killing me no longer promised much.

“But Pierre Noyeau possessed some private information—proof, not suspicions. It was that which The Squid was afraid of. And he came prepared to silence Noyeau forever the minute he saw him getting into such a tight corner that he'd be certain to talk. When I produced that thumb-print, he cut the wire and fired.”

“And I saw him reachin' out once to cut it before,” broke in Forgeron. “You remember what you told me, Lepadou, about there bein' a man with crooked arms and legs that you suspected?”

“Yes, it was one of The Squid's favorite tricks. Any man can give himself crooked limbs by turning his toes in and his palms out. Taken along with other things, it gives

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one an entirely altered look, even if done slightly.”

“That’s just what he done, reachin’ back of him towards the wire—you see there, where it runs along the edge of the casin’ of the door into Jayne’s room? He was loosenin’ it. But I was watchin’ all the while for Le Glaçon to be the one that started something, and I wouldn’t let myself believe my eyes, though his arm goin’ crooked that way made me jump.”

“Then you’ve seen The Squid at work,” said I, “and betraying himself by a movement which has become a habit. But you needn’t blame yourself for not warning us. Noyeau only got his deserts.”

“His deserts?”

“Yes, wasn’t I trying to send him to the guillotine? I hope nobody thinks I’ve been as far wrong in this matter as to accuse an innocent man. Boussai, still to call him that, suggested the murder, but Noyeau carried it out, and for his own selfish purposes.”

“I don’t understand,” complained Tar-



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dieu. “How could Boussai suggest a murder? Hypnotism, you mean?”

I had practically to improvise a theory, for I hadn't had time to think it out. But once more, Clara, I hit upon what I believe is the truth. How the brain does work when you are sufficiently wrought up. For I saw at once that to obtain sufficient influence over his proxies—and proxies I now know he has—The Squid would first have to associate himself with them in some petty criminal enterprise. It's only when they are already outside the law that men have enough confidence in each other's evil to plan murders together.

So I made a sheer guess at it, and told the judge that The Squid—oh, in a character quite different from that of Boussai—would be found to have been helping Noyeau to rob the Boncoeur *usines* by falsifying the books, and that only then had he dared to suggest the way of getting rid of Ninette.

“But why should The Squid want him to get rid of her?”

“Here you come to the psychological crux

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of the problem," I responded. "And I'll frankly admit that I don't know—not positively. I've already confessed that I'm not sure The Squid even exists as a single individual. Is there a band of arch-criminals which has come into being since the war, like a modern and more terrible cult of Thuggee? Perhaps. But it is easier for me to believe that the seeming unity in the authorship of a certain series of crimes which is horrifying the world is a genuine unity—that Marle, Le Calliou, Boussai, the man with the crooked limbs, and a host of others, are really one.

"Is he a revolutionary? A fanatic? Somebody with a coldly rational scheme in the back of his head? Is he sane? Is he mad? Once more, I can't say. But you will recall the history of Gille de Rais, Your Honor, the original of the story of Bluebeard. He was neither a myth, nor a lunatic in the ordinary meaning of the word. He was that which the Marquis de Sade afterwards became—became in a much lesser de-

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gree, though it is Sade who gave his name to the mania. Perhaps here is the clew.

“Gille de Rais began by making human sacrifices to the devil, hoping that he would be able to turn lead into gold, and ended by taking delight in the horrible ritual. The Squid is more refined. No doubt there is—or was originally—a commercial side to his activities. But I think he has become a slave to the gloating pleasure he takes in simply knowing that on a certain date a certain woman is going to die.

“Friends,” I went on, a little melodramatically I am afraid, “you may not see me again. I’m going to take up the trail where I dropped it. The Boncoeur affair is only an episode. But I hope it’s solution marks a step forward, as at last I’ve seen the real Marle face to face. Good night and good-bye.”

“Wait!” almost screamed the *judge d’instruction*. “I more than half—a good deal more than half believe everything you’ve said. But I’ve totally forgotten to ask you how Ninette Boncoeur was killed.”



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“That, Your Honor, is easily explained. In all of these Squid cases there is something fragile—usually a beautiful cup—always something used in connection with food. And it is always found broken.

“Pierre Noyeau gave such a cup to his *fiancée*, a cup so delicate that not even a servant would think of handling it roughly. What is more to the point, it was a cup which she would not be likely to lend. Therefore, though it looked at first as if both she and Jayne had had their breakfasts prepared in common, there was nevertheless one thing on the tray which Charlotte brought from the kitchen which one and not the other of the girls would be sure to take.

“But the cup was examined,” objected Tardieu. “I have not only Boussai’s but Forgeron’s and the chemist’s word for it that every one of the broken pieces was put into a dish of water, carefully washed, and the water subjected to analysis. No trace of any poison was found.”

“That was because one of the pieces had been cleaned and dirtied again with harm-



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less chocolate before the chemist ever saw it. When Forgeron made his inventory, all the pieces, fourteen in number, were here on the floor. There were fourteen given the chemist, and fourteen—as I discovered later—made the cup complete.”

“And I thought you were pretendin’ to be anxious about the *number* of the pieces—not about the cup’s bein’ all there,” Forgeron interrupted.

I went on:

“But at the time of the making of the snap-shot one was temporarily missing. There has always been a missing piece of crockery in every case which I have attributed to The Squid. It is his signature, the weak spot in his method, his Achilles’ heel.

“For—do you see—a tiny pellet of cyanide covered with a soluble gum had been added to the raised portion of the pattern which ran around the cup’s outer edge, and painted to look like the rest. Placed where the lips would come in contact with it in the act of drinking, the coating was certain sooner or later to dissolve. It was necessary

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to remove even a chemical trace of this pellet. And this time Boussai meant to correct the single flaw in his scheme by afterwards returning the piece to the pile. He was too late. The snap-shot had already betrayed its absence—and I came very near failing to profit by the fact.

“I also failed to profit by Noyeau’s suspicious attempt to direct attention to the possibility of the poison being in some sort of candy when he first came to me with a pretended protest against the suicide hypothesis. But that was excusable, since I had no means then of fathoming his motive. No doubt he actually did object to the idea of suicide, except for my benefit. He wanted Benson convicted. That must have suited Boussai, too, for he made no attempt to provide the piece of paper in which the cyanide would have been contained had Ninette actually taken her own life.”

Having completed this exposition, I would have gone, only I saw Jayne moving shyly towards Benson, whom Forgeron had unconsciously been keeping at a distance.

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“I’m ashamed to look you in the face,” I heard her say. “How *could* I have doubted you? But it was only for a little while—when I thought it *must* have been you in the other automobile.”

She got no further, for the young Count de Montfayat gathered her quite properly in his arms. I made for the door, Forgeron at my heels. I’ve had a long talk with Forgeron, and we’re the best of friends. He’s going to help me and Le Squelette round up The Squid, and our first objective is to be the rue des Grottes. I don’t know why, but I feel sure that there is something *there*.

Then it’s home and—well, not even *you* will be able to say by that time that you’re not sufficiently recovered from your accident for us to imitate what promises to be the immediate procedure of Jayne and her Count de Montfayat.







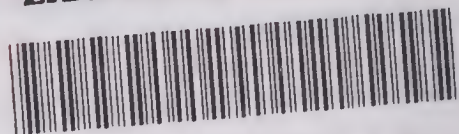




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